

OUR VALLEY.



Frontispiece.

THE MILLER'S DAUGHTER.

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UR ALLEY.

By the Author of "*The Children of Seelberg*," "*Madeline's Progress*,"
"*The Cathedral Organist*," &c., &c.

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"Do lovely things, not dream them, all day long,
And so make life, death, and that vast for ever
One grand, sweet song."

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OUR VALLEY.

CHAPTER I.

"I remember, I remember
The house where I was born,
The little window where the sun
Came peeping in at morn.
The lilacs where the robin built,
And where my brother set
The laburnum on his birthday—
The tree is living yet!"



UR VALLEY! What is it more than any other, you ask? Why is it that I pause over those two words with a loving tenderness, a fullness of heart that no words can express?

Listen, and I will try and tell you something of the valley where I was born, and which is still, thank God, my own home, that you too may understand why it is dearer to me, and not only to me, but to many others, than any other spot on the whole earth.

Our valley—it stretches down from the borders of Exmoor to the Severn sea—broad and fair with orchards and meadows, and cornfields and pleasant homesteads. On either side the great hills stand, guarding it in from the outer world ; and far and wide the open moorland spreads, marked here and there with a soft shadow that tells of some wooded coombe, some ravine where the red deer makes its lair in the tangled brushwood, under giant oak and ash. From hill and moor, from coombe and wood, a hundred streams descend to meet in the valley and flow together to the sea. Watered by these rivulets, sheltered from cold winds by the surrounding hills, and fanned by mild Atlantic breezes, our valley is a favoured region, a garden of Eden, where all fair things thrive and prosper. Hollies and yews grow tall in the hedges, flowers and ferns cover every bank, myrtle and hydrangea blossom in the open air, and the fruit-trees bend under their wealth of promise. And in the early autumn days, when the soft, rich bloom of purple heather spreads over all, when the gorse is golden on the hill-side, and the mountain-ash hangs out its scarlet berries, when sun and cloud throw changing lights on the hollows where the woods are breaking into fire, and the sea has not yet lost its summer blue, there is no lovelier spot in all the West-country than our valley.

Strangers come from far off to gaze and wonder at its beauties. Poor Londoners, who have been shut in all their days between smoky city walls, bring their children for a draught of fresh air and clear sunshine. Artists come, too, with brush and easel, and greedily seize upon bits of colour that have become parts of our lives, familiar objects whose beauty is an accustomed thing to each of us. But none of these know anything of the pride, the joy which we feel who are of the valley bred and born. Although our valley was not as free from sin and sorrow as those who first saw it might suppose, somehow we men of the valley had always a kind of contempt for the hill-people and all outsiders, holding ourselves to be a superior race, and extending the right-hand of fellowship to every valley-man of whatever class he might be. This arose, of course, partly from the valley being almost exclusively in the hands of one proprietor. From the topmost beacon on the moor to Durstone Rocks, whose sharp reef ran out into Wenlock Bay, the valley owned Sir Guy Wyncourt as lord and master ; indeed, it was a common saying that in the valley there were but three things to be thought of—three words that were on everybody's tongue—the valley, cider, and Sir Guy.

From time immemorial there had been Wyncourts in the valley, and so deeply had this idea

taken root in my childish imagination that in my own mind I invariably included a Wyncourt in the survivors of the deluge, and in a Bible-picture of my infancy which represented Noah entering the ark, followed by pairs of human beings and animals, I mentally put down a dusky figure in the background as a former Sir Guy. As my historical knowledge widened, I became satisfied to trace back the origin of the Wyncourts to the Norman conquest, from which time they had held lands in the valley.

But absolute as was the sway of Sir Guy, deep as was the respect in which he was held, a shadow had fallen upon the house of Wyncourt in my young days. Old Sir Guy had never recovered from the shock of the death of his eldest son, Captain Wyncourt. The event happened in my early childhood. I have a dim recollection of being held up in our servant Judith's arms to see the long funeral procession, and a very lively one of being shaken and scolded for breaking out into a cry of recognition at the sight of my father on horseback in the yeomanry troop.

People said Sir Guy was a broken man from that day. He seldom left Silscote, but lived among his own people. I remember him as a splendid old gentleman, dignified and courteous, but kindness itself, riding up the valley on his white pony, and stopping before some farmhouse or at some cottage door.

My father, James Isham, was one of the few yeomen in the valley, that is to say, he owned the house we lived in and a field or two round it, which may have accounted for a certain independence of position he enjoyed; but he yielded to none in his loyal devotion to Sir Guy, from whom he also rented a large farm in Silscote.

In Silscote, I say, for although we were in the same parish, and on Sundays all went to the same church high on the hill, the group of cottages and blacksmith's forge under the great walnut tree formed a separate hamlet, called Fairlie. A few hundred yards from these, at the end of a long lane with high banks overgrown with trailing ivy and hartstongue and beds of luxuriant moss, and closed in on either side with trees so tall their towering branches scarcely let in a glimpse of the blue above, was our house.

There it stood, its white gables and thatched roof full of deep browns and purples, stained here and there with golden lichen, looking out from under the shade of chestnut and ash trees, and from the mass of fuchsias and flowering creepers under which the porch was buried. In front was a smooth stretch of velvet lawn, with great hydrangea bushes and clumps of dark, red-stemmed yews, beyond which the close-shaven turf of the open hill-side spread, to dip suddenly into the line of shining

waters that bounded the view, except on very clear days, when the far coast of Wales rose into sight out of a soft haze of distance. There, on the breezy hill-side, looking over that glorious sea, was the old home, where Harold and I grew up under Judith's care.

My father had married late in life, and had early been left a widower. Harold, who was by three years the elder, had a shadowy recollection of being kissed and fondled by some one who was certainly not Judith ; but my only idea of a mother was the name, " Mary Isham," written in an angular hand on the fly-leaf of the big Bible, with the words, "*Died November 10, 18—*," added in my father's writing below, and the green mound in the churchyard.

Judith Pepper therefore was a very important personage in our early history, the more so that father was out at work in the fields all day, and we seldom saw him till night. Judith was housekeeper, cook, parlour and dairy maid all in one ; she baked, cooked, swept, and cleaned from morning till night, in short, provided for our general comfort and welfare in a hundred ways. Her one delight in life seemed to be to toil and slave for us, and no persuasion could induce her to accept of the assistance of a girl under her. Over and over again I have heard father say, in his easy, good-humoured way, " Judith,

why don't you try Polly Jones or Susan Jane (as the case might be)? she seems a likely girl enough."

And from Judith came the invariable answer, in her sharp, shrill tones, "Likely gal, indeed! none of yer likely gals for me, Susan Janes or Pollys, gad-about as can't lay a fire and never sweep out their corners."

There the matter ended, and when one day I ventured to observe, "But you might teach them, Judith," I was met by so withering a look of scorn that I held my peace ever after.

Poor Judith! she had her angles and rough edges, but there was not a better soul alive, or one who had a more true-hearted care for Harold and me. In our eyes her high cheek-bones and square-jawed face were beautiful exceedingly, and I remember, when some school-boy companion asked Harold in later days who was the prettiest person he knew, he replied unhesitatingly, "Judith."

There were mysteries too about her ways of doing things, which served to increase our respect and admiration for her, even though we might not always appreciate her motives to the full. When we stood by watching her operations in kitchen or dairy, she had always an answer ready for us. If we asked her why she skimmed the fat off the boiler where the pork had been boiled, and used it for cakes instead of butter, she met us with the

unanswerable argument, "For greater salvation," a word which, in Judith's dialect, stood for *saving*. If, again, after meals she went round with knife and plate to scrape together the bread we had crumbled on the table-cloth, and sternly resisted our petitions to keep some for the birdies, it was always for "greater salvation." This last operation, indeed, we soon learnt to submit to, when we once discovered that those fragments of bread were used, with a reasonable admixture of currants and spice, to make our Sunday pudding; but all my childhood I laboured under vain efforts to reconcile Judith's economies with the answer in the catechism concerning things necessary to salvation.

It is time to come to what was the first great trouble of my life. I had always known I could not run like Harold, and was much shorter than he, but then I was three whole years younger, so it was not so much to be wondered at; one day, however, my childish mind was greatly disturbed by a remark of Farmer Malsbury, who had come in with father, and after admiring Harold's sturdy growth and curly flaxen hair, turned to me with pitying exclamation, "That's the poor little cripple, eh?" Cripple--I had never heard the word before, but it had an ugly sound, and I began to connect it disagreeably with my lame leg, and to wonder whether I should ever be like other boys. Harold,

whom I consulted, however, shook his head, and said it was only because I was so much younger than he was, and when I was older I should be strong and tall too. "When I am six," I said to myself with satisfaction, and looked forward eagerly to the day which was to effect so desirable a transformation in me.

The day came. I jumped out of bed in the morning, and considered myself in the big looking-glass on the nursery table. Alas! there was no change. I was just the same as ever, little and weak, and dragged one leg after me in a most unmistakable manner. It was the wrong day, perhaps! I might have mistook the day, and after all to-morrow might be my birthday—not to-day. But no, Harold and I had caught a glimpse yesterday of the birthday cake, with its marvels of pink and white sugar, being prepared in the kitchen, and there, laid by Judith's kind hands, on a chair by the bed ready for me to put on, was the new blouse with bright buttons which father had promised me on the occasion. There was no doubt about it. I was six years old, and I was still a cripple. "Harold," I said piteously, "it isn't true, after all—I am just the same—look there." Harold jumped out on the floor, prepared to make almost any statement that could contribute to my peace of mind, but even his truthfulness shrank from a denial

of the plain fact that stared us in the face, and he stood looking into the glass with an air of hopeless dismay.

"Well, Laurie," he said suddenly, with a bright look of recovered gladness, as a happy thought struck him, "if you can't be like me, I'll be like you ;" and he stooped down till his head reached no higher than mine, and began to drag one leg slowly after the other.

A shudder ran through me at the sight. That Harold should be like that was horrible. "O no, Harold, no," I called out, "you mustn't ; I had much rather stay as I am than see you like that, and you see it wouldn't do me any good either."

"Well, it wouldn't much," said Harold, in his slow way—he was never quick at grasping an idea—"and you know I couldn't have gone on long, it was too uncomfortable."

So we kissed each other and laughed over it, and enjoyed the birthday cake together, forgetful of my bitter disappointment, but from that day I became painfully sensitive to other people's remarks, and was quite conscious of my physical defect. I never spoke of it to others though. Judith met any approach to the subject with a "Tut-tut, nonsense," which made me relapse into myself, and think if I had had a mother, she would have understood.

I was lame and useless, and I wanted to be

strong and active, able to do all that Harold did. The sense of this gave me a certain feeling of loneliness. It taught me to seek companionship, to look for sympathy in things which but for that I might never have noted. I learnt to love the still glory of the woods and the calm of the summer sea, to watch for the changing colours in sky and wave, the lights that shone on the moorland and the deep shadows in the forest-thicket, where the birds sang their sweetest and the brook babbled over the stones.

Books, too, became my best friends. I devoured greedily all that came within my reach, and found that here, at least, I was not behind other boys, and, what I cared more about, could even help Harold; for with all his bright spirits and vivacity, he was hopelessly dull at learning, and from the days when we sat on a form in the village dame's cottage, to learn our A B C, and sing "Perpendicular—horizontal," under Goody Alderman's instruction, I can remember the blank look of despair on his face if ever he was required to answer a question. Dear old King!—it was the pet name I gave him in a fit of admiration for the Saxon hero—how often he would bring me his sums to do, and his copies to write, and always end by saying—

"We'll live together all our lives, Laurie boy,

won't we ? and I 'll manage the farm and pay the men, and you shall sit at home and read, and count the money, and we 'll have Judith to make tea and cakes."

Whatever others might be, he was always good and gentle to me, and though, since those days, I have known many brothers, I have never found two that loved each other quite like we did.





CHAPTER II.

"The petals of to-day,
To-morrow fallen away,
Shall something leave instead,
To live when they are dead;
When you, ye vague desires,
Have vanished."

ONE afternoon, when Harold and I were at play in the back-parlour, he slicing away vigorously at an unfortunate wooden horse till it was nothing but a shapeless block, I reading a book of fairy tales, our attention was roused by voices in the garden.

We looked out and saw Sir Guy, with his hooked nose and white hair and gold-headed cane, walking up the path, leaning on Mr. Edmond, as his now only surviving son was generally called.

For a minute the thought of having to receive such august visitors alarmed us, and Harold was for escaping by the back door; but just as they entered father came in too, and, without noticing us, they all three stood talking in the porch.

"I wanted to ask you, Isham," began Sir Guy, "if you have been at Lynch lately and seen Farmer Clive's new buildings?"

Lynch was a village belonging to Sir Guy, right away across the moor; but I had been there with father in the gig the last week, and so I pricked up my ears to hear what followed.

"Can you tell me," continued Sir Guy, having ascertained this fact, "exactly where the door is in the new barn? I want to give Winter the order for one on the same pattern, and I cannot precisely recall the arrangement."

Father scratched his head, and thought and thought in vain. It was no use, he could not remember, and could only beg Sir Guy's pardon for his forgetfulness. I had, however, made good use of my eyes that day at Lynch, and I whispered to Harold that I thought I knew, upon which he tried to push me forward. I shrank back, but our little scuffle attracted Mr. Edmond's keen gaze.

"Perhaps the boy knows," he said presently, looking at Harold's bright, open face.

"Bless you, no, Mr. Edmond," said my father; "besides, he never went with me to Lynch at all; it was *only* Laurence."

I fell back into the furthest corner of the room, but Harold, nothing daunted, spoke out boldly, "Father, Laurie knows."

Father looked incredulously at me, and I wished I had kept back that foolish remark of mine to Harold ; but Sir Guy's kindly, "Let's have it, then, little man," encouraged me, and with an effort to steady my trembling voice, I described as well as I could the position of the door and the arrangement of the buildings.

My stammering words seemed to convey a new light to Mr. Edmond.

"Ah, that's just what I thought—on the right, as you go in from the house, exactly. Now, father, you will see what I mean," and he turned to Sir Guy, and went off in an elaborate explanation which I could not follow.

"Thank you, my boy," said Sir Guy, as he left the house, patting my head kindly, "you've done us a good turn, and if you always keep your eyes open like that, you'll be a useful man some day."

I blushed all over, but for the first time in my life I thought there were still hopes for me, and I might some day be of use in the world. Sir Guy had said "a useful man," and that—why it was the very thing I longed to become, and feared I could never be.

That was not all either. A few days afterwards came a message from Mr. Mayne, Sir Guy's steward, that I was to go to the Hall and see

Mrs. Wyncourt, the captain's widow, who was now staying there.

Neither father nor Judith could understand how it was I was sent for and not Harold ; but Sir Guy's will was law, and I was accordingly dressed in my Sunday clothes, and taken by kind Mr. Mayne to the Hall door. Here I was met by a solemn-looking gentleman, whom I had seen before in church, at one end of the Hall-servants' pew, but who was amazingly condescending and gracious to me, escorting me through great rooms and corridors, along which I passed with awe and wonder, similar, I thought, to that which Aladdin or Cinderella must have felt in the enchanted cave or the royal palace, and allowing me to stop for a minute before the picture of a boy about my own age, in a blue velvet suit, with a spaniel lying at his feet.

"The late Captain Wyncourt as a child," my guide said, with a stately wave of the hand towards the portrait ; but scarcely had he uttered the words, than the opening of a door made him pause and turn to me with a loud whisper of "Mrs. Wyncourt."

I looked round bewildered. A lady in deep mourning was moving towards me, and a soft voice, that sounded strangely musical after Judith's shrill tones, said—

"You are Laurence Isham. Sir Guy told me he was going to send you to see me. That will do, Churchill, thank you ;" and my solemn friend retired, while Mrs. Wyncourt led me into a room that seemed lovelier than all the rest.

The eyes that bent over me were so gentle, they took all my terrors away, and I looked wonderingly on the pale green walls decked with china and mirrors and gold frames, out of which angels in robes of delicately tinted azure and rose were gazing down upon me.

Mrs. Wyncourt allowed me to look round in silence for a few minutes, and then led me to the large bow-window, where I broke into an exclamation of delighted surprise. •

For there, bright in the afternoon sunshine, were our own hills, with their familiar forms rising one above another, each beacon and heathered knoll well-known to me, and there was the valley stretching all along to the sea, which came in above the green trec-tops.

"Why, they are our hills!" I said, "and there is Wenlock Bay, and just round there, upon this side of the hill, is Fairlie—Fairlie, where we live."

"Yes," said Mrs. Wyncourt, smiling at my astonishment. "I know you live at Fairlie. I remember," she continued with a little sigh, "riding by Fairlie once, but it was long ago—a great many years. You

were quite a little baby then, and I held you in my arms. You had a brother too, if I remember right."

"Yes," I said quickly. "Harold is my brother."

"And are you very fond of him?" she said, stroking my hair as she spoke.

"Of course I am," I said a little indignantly; to think of being asked if I were fond of Harold!

"Poor little Laurence," she said softly, "and you and Harold live all alone with your father?"

"No," I said, "not all alone, we have got Judith too."

"Ah, Judith, I did not know about her," said Mrs. Wyncourt, with another smile; "but I knew your mother. Sit down, dear boy, and I will tell you about her."

For my eyes had turned to her with greedy, eager inquiry. To think I had found some one who could tell me about my mother! How I listened while she told me that she had often talked to my mother, and how good and patient she was all the time of her last illness.

I longed to pour out my heart to the kind lady and tell her all my trouble, and how I was lame, and the doctor had put my leg in these stiff irons, but, somehow, I could not find the words.

But I think she understood something of what I felt, for before I went home she pointed to a motto

that was written on the walls between the trumpet-blowing angels. I had been reading the words in strange, old-fashioned letters, and wondering what they could mean up there :

“THEY ALSO SERVE WHO ONLY STAND
AND WAIT.”

“Do you know what that means, Laurence?” she said. “It means that some of God’s creatures have to go and work all over the world ; but some are weakly and suffering, and God tells them not to trouble if they cannot be active and useful like others, but to remember their work is to stand and wait, and to serve Him as He wills.”

Her words were something like that, or at least had about that meaning. Child that I was, I scarcely understood all they meant, but I took away a vague idea that I too had a work to do, and could be like God’s angels, even though I was lame and could not work or run like Harold.

And the thought comforted and helped me many and many a time afterwards, both when I was a child and when I grew up to be a man. She went away soon after that, the sweet gentle lady who had known my mother, and who had been so kind to me, and I never saw her again. For she went far away, they said, to live with her own friends and tend and comfort others who were sick and sorrow-

ing, and never came back to Silscote till the day when she was brought to be laid in the vault of the Wyncourts by her husband's side.

I wonder if she knows now, dear lady, all that her kindness was to me, or how often and often the words she had spoken came back in after-life to be my help and strength. Perhaps she has seen it all from her rest up yonder, for I often think the veil that parts our dear dead from us is thinner than men dream, and they at times are very near to us. Or perhaps some kind angel has left his place before the Throne of God to whisper it in her ear, and tell her how to this day I bless her memory.





CHAPTER III.

"I loved the brimming wave that swam
Thro' quiet meadows round the mill,
The sleepy pool above the dam,
The pool beneath it never still;
The meal-sacks on the whiten'd floor,
The dark round of the dripping wheel,
The very air about the door
Made misty with the floating meal."



DOWN in the valley, half-way between Fairlie and Silscote was the Old Mill, in the eyes of many the most picturesque spot of the country.

It stood apart from other houses in the narrowest and most secluded part of the valley, only a little below the place known as Waters' Meet, where three separate streams descending from the Exmoor hills met in the deepest, thickest shade of the woods and flowed together to turn the mill-wheel.

A straggling old house it was, built of the deep-tored red stone of the country, with gables thickly overgrown with ivy that was only cut away in front of the mullioned windows. Underneath its walls ran the brook, which a few paces off was crossed by

a footway and low stone bridge, and all round ash and oak and feathering birch stood, closing it in on every side, excepting where a distant glimpse of far-away moor made a purple shadow through the light green of the branches, giving the old place a heightened charm of poetry.

But best of all in my eyes was the mill-wheel itself, with the old stone on which the waters had dripped for so many years, full of wonderful colours, rich browns and golden greens shading off here and there into deep indigo ; and then the water—sometimes rushing and tumbling down in a sheet of milk-white foam, sometimes, that was when the mill was stopped, falling in silvery drops that clung big and glittering to wheel and dam. Very often in the summer months artists brought their tents and camp stools and sat down to draw the mill, and as I watched them set about their work I heard more than one exclaim that this was a ready-made picture.

To Harold and me the Old Mill was early a favourite resort from the days when we used to go and have tea with old Mrs. Grindley, who lived there all by herself. Her husband, who had been the miller, was long dead, and although the old lady had a daughter married at Somerton, some miles off, she preferred reigning alone over the mill and miller's man, which latter mealy personage was

a particular friend of ours, and allowed us to tumble about the white floor and among the sacks in a privileged manner. The fact was the old lady had a temper, at least this was the way in which Judith accounted for her solitude; although in justice I am bound to say Harold and I never experienced its ill effects, not even on the unlucky day when Harold asked her at tea, "Mrs. Grindley, where is your temper? Judith says you have got one, and I want to know what it is like."

Poor Harold! he asked the question in the most unsuspecting innocence. We had been speculating only a few days ago what this mysterious thing could be—and he was quite sure it must be something pleasant, perhaps nice to eat—because people talked with such respect of Mrs. Grindley.

The moment the words were out of his mouth though, I felt instinctively he had said something wrong, for Sally the maid giggled so loudly she almost dropped the tray, and the old lady fidgetted on her chair, and even blushed most distinctly, but after rather an awkward pause she put a good face on it, and said, "O no, my dear, I am sure *you* have not a temper; I daresay Judith only told you not to be in a temper, for you know it is not a pretty thing for a little boy."

Upon this wilful perversion of his words, Harold, regardless of my frowns, exclaimed—

"But Judith said it was *you* that had a temper, not *me*," and I could never be thankful enough that at that moment Mrs. Grindley was seized with a violent fit of coughing which so awed and alarmed Harold that he asked no more questions the rest of that tea-time.

No harm was done, however, and as long as the old lady lived we went to tea regularly at the mill on Sundays, and were regaled with buttered toast and three lumps of sugar a-piece in our tea.

How good it was, that buttered toast! Harold and I always impatiently awaited the moment when Sally brought it in, and Mrs. Grindley felt the plate to see if it was really hot, she being always most particular in this respect.

Often indeed Sally was sent back to fetch a hotter plate, a ceremony which tried our patience severely, and we never could understand how she could find Mrs. Grindley so difficult to please in this matter.

One day I have never forgotten. Sally brought in the buttered toast in most tempting-looking piles on the usual brown dish.

"Let me feel the plate," said Mrs. Grindley from the arm-chair, where she sat in her yellow ribbons and best Sunday black satin gown, our and Judith's never-failing object of admiration.

Sally dutifully advanced, and we looked on as

Mrs. Grindley took the plate, and, to our great surprise, dropped it with a sudden shriek and jump. Down on her lap, all over the black satin gown, fell the buttered toast, leaving great stains of grease wherever it rested, and crack went the plate, shivering to atoms on the floor, while Mrs. Grindley stormed and fumed and licked her burnt fingers, and Sally stood by with an air of injured innocence, saying—

“Why, ma'am, you always say as how the plate isn't hot enough, and to-day at least I thought you shouldn't have no cause of complaining!”

What fault could Mrs. Grindley find after that? even though there was a mischievous twinkle in Sally's eye as her back was turned to her mistress when she stooped to pick up the broken bits, which made Harold and I suspect her of heating one side of the plate not altogether unintentionally.

A year or two after that a change came at the Old Mill. One day we were told Mrs. Grindley had fallen down in a fit, and next that we should never see her again, but that Mrs. Mavor, the married daughter, had come to live at the mill with her husband.

The first sight we had of the new comers was one afternoon when Harold and I had wandered down to the mill after school-hours. It was spring-

time. All along our lane we trod ankle-deep in violets, and the banks of the trout-stream were yellow with primroses. I had stopped to gather some, while Harold was amusing himself with his favourite occupation of putting stones in the brook and stepping from one to the other, when all at once we heard a childish voice singing—

“When good King Arthur ruled the land.”

I looked round in the direction from which the sound came, and caught sight of a patch of blue through the trees.

I called to Harold, and we advanced cautiously under the shade of the branches. There, sitting on the stone bridge over the mill-stream, was the prettiest little maiden I thought I had ever seen. She wore a blue skirt and white pinafore, and the hat, that went swinging backwards and forwards as she sang, was white too, with a wreath of pink rose-buds. How she sang too! opening her tiny mouth and pouring out her whole heart in the words of her song, all unconscious that we were listening.

I held my breath, half fearful the sweet vision would vanish away, but Harold gave me a knowing nudge, and said, in a loud whisper—

“The married daughter!”

My only answer was a frown, as much of dis-

pleasure at his daring to speak as of contempt for his ignorance ; but before he could commit himself further the song had stopped, and the singer looked round.

Harold advanced boldly, while I held back with my usual shyness ; but to my surprise the child did not seem frightened. She only stepped leisurely down from her seat on the bridge and came towards us.

Harold was the first to speak. "Do you live here ?" he asked, pointing to the mill.

"Yes," was the answer, "do you ?" and a pair of bright blue eyes met mine, as the speaker looked from Harold to me, and then back at him.

"Yes, up at Fairlie," said Harold, nodding towards the hill-side.

"What are your names ?" was the next question.

We satisfied her on this point, and heard in return that she was Mrs. Grindley's grand-daughter, and that her name was Fortune Mavor. After a little further conversation, we said we thought we must go back, as it would be tea-time, and Judith would be cross if we were late.

"Haven't you had tea yet ?" said Fortune, "I have mine at four ;" and I felt conscious of a certain inferiority, and wished for the first time we too had tea at four.

"But if you are going back," she continued

graciously, "I should like to go with you and see your home, if it isn't very far off."

I assured her that it was not more than a quarter of an hour's walk, and we all three turned up the hill, Fortune prattling all the time in a way that I thought perfectly charming, while Harold soon became rather bored, and took to making ducks and drakes in the brook.

Up to Fairlie we took her, however, and she was duly introduced to the farm and dairy, and the young calves and Judith's poultry, to Judith herself too, by whom she was actually invited to stop to tea.

This, however, she declined, with a little bend of her head and an air of self-possession which increased my wonder, saying that she had had tea already, besides which, that mother would not like her to be out so late, and she must be returning home. She accepted Judith's offer of escort, however, politely, and we were desired to drink the cups of tea that stood ready poured out, and be sure and not leave the room, while Judith put on sun-bonnet and shawl and saw the young lady safe home.

Harold breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed, and we were left alone.

"What a pretty face she's got, and how clever she is," I said, in warm admiration of our new acquaintance. "And not a bit shy."

"Not a bit," said Harold, munching a huge slice of thinly-buttered bread, prepared by Judith ; " but she talks too much."

" Oh, I like her talking," I replied ; " she knows about everything. She's lovely, I think."

" She's jolly eyes," said Harold, reflectively. " I'm glad she's gone, though. I was afraid she'd stop to tea."

This seemed to me very chary praise, and I felt a little disposed to quarrel with Master Harold on this score, but from that day Fortune Mavor and ourselves were firm friends. Her father, the new miller, was an easy, good-natured sort of man who doted on this his only child, and Mrs. Mavor was the kindest, most motherly of women, who, having no boys herself, took the liveliest interest in all that concerned us, and always gave us the warmest of welcomes.

So the Old Mill became even more to us than it was in Mrs. Grindley's days, and round it some of the pleasantest memories of my childhood cluster.

What games of play we had together in the woods or down on the sea-shore ! what merry tea parties and dinners in the cheerful parlour of the mill ! Were ever whortleberry tarts so delicious as those Mrs. Mavor baked ? and then she always gave us cream with them, an extravagance from which Judith's frugal mind would have recoiled.

It was a new pleasure to have another playmate, and one so docile and teachable as Fortune ; and I think her companionship was the more precious to me that, owing to my lameness, I could not enter into all Harold's more active sports. Till I knew her, Judith's honest face and shining cheeks, polished like our best mahogany table, had been beautiful in my eyes, but I saw that Fortune was, oh ! so much prettier. I never tired of looking at her, or thought any one else was to be compared with her. For her eyes were like the deep blue of the waters in Wenlock Bay on July days, and her hair was that clear pale gold which you sometimes see at sunset in the autumn skies, and she had the daintiest little feet and hands I ever saw.

Certainly, too, she was a very clever child in her way. She could repeat " John Gilpin " by heart without a mistake, and knew all the dates of the Kings of England, and which of Henry VIII.'s wives had been beheaded, and which had died in their beds. But what was much more surprising than any amount of book-learning was the sensible, womanly way in which she always behaved.

At church I used to wonder at her sitting up so upright and demure under the lion and unicorn of the gallery, and father often remarked she was a pattern to Harold, who was the most incorrigible fidget, and pulled a whole Prayer-book to pieces

during one sermon—it was a missionary one, to be sure, all about Tinnevelly and other long names, and lasted a whole hour and three quarters—and yet, at the end of it, there was Fortune sitting up with folded hands and little face as solemn as ever.

It was this propriety and womanliness which made father so fond of her. She would sit in the parlour at Fairlie when he was there and never speak unless she was spoken to, in which case she would answer in the clearest, wisest little voice.

She never lost her temper, never cried, or was naughty like other children, but, all the same, had some wonderful power of always getting her own way, and if ever she had set her heart on something, would never rest till that something was obtained. Perhaps that explained why she was never cross, only Harold and I never thought of that in those days.

Oddly enough, the only person who never cordially liked Fortune was Judith. She used to shake her head in her determined way, and say, "Too sharp for me," or "I don't like yer over-wise children." It puzzled me for a long time, but at last I came to the conclusion that this inexplicable feeling must be due to jealousy on Judith's part, though certainly it seemed a pity.

When Harold was twelve—that was not long

after Fortune first came to Silscote—the National School was pronounced to be insufficient for our education any longer, and we were sent three times a week to a superior school at Rockhead, a town about four miles off, where we received instruction in various branches of learning at an “Academy for Young Gentlemen.”

The next year it was held necessary for Fortune’s education that she should go to school at Rockhead too, and as conveniently enough there was an “Establishment for Young Ladies” over the way, it was agreed between our parents that we should all three go together. Fortune had a brown donkey to ride, and Harold and I had an old pony, which, in consideration for my lame leg, I chiefly monopolised, and we always rode backwards and forwards together.

Very pleasant we found these rides were in the fine weather and long days, and we used to linger on our homeward way to pick blackberries or stop as we crossed the hill to look out for the stag-hounds, and laugh and clap our hands with glee if by any lucky chance the hunt came down the sides of the beacon or sweeping up the valley.

But when the weather was rainy and the days were short we occasionally had adventures of a somewhat disagreeable kind; and we met with one adventure that might have had a tragical end.

It was an afternoon in November, when the days were closing in, and by some unlucky chance we were later than usual in leaving Rôckhead.

There had been a good deal of rain lately, and the ford of the brook we had to cross half-way between the town and Silscote had already been much swollen in the morning.

And now, when we reached it about five in the afternoon, the waters were rushing fiercely down, and Harold, who was running on in front, had to cling to the railing of the foot-bridge not to be swept away by their force.

He got safely across, however, and as he ran off, shouted to me to keep my feet out of the water, and make haste on home. I was carefully guiding Taffy's bridle as he entered the ford, when I heard Fortune's voice behind me, entreating me to help her to make the donkey go on.

I turned back to help her, and tried hard for upwards of an hour to make Jack pass the ford. But no coaxing or bullying could overcome the animal's reluctance. He justified, on that occasion, all that has been said of the obstinacy of his race, and at last laid down on the other side as if to show he was not to be persuaded into tempting Providence by entering the noisy flood.

What was to be done? It was getting darker and darker every minute, and to add to our distress,

it beganⁿ to rain steadily. Fortune looked at me imploringly, and said, half-crying—

“O Laurie, what shall we do? it is so cold and wet, and we shall never get home.”

It was indeed difficult to see what course to pursue next. Jack was evidently not to be conquered. But there was Taffy. Perhaps he would carry us both over. The greatness of the emergency inspired me with new determination. “I tell you what, Fortune,” I said resolutely, “you must get on Taffy and leave the donkey.”

Fortune asked nothing better. She climbed up on the pony with her books and basket, and held on fast with both her arms round my waist, leaving Jack on the other bank.

“That’s all right,” I cried gleefully, shaking the reins and urging Taffy on; “now we’ll be across directly.”

“Oh, I’m so glad, dear Laurie,” said Fortune, but before she had finished her sentence, Taffy, unaccustomed to a double load, had given a sudden plunge, followed by a kick.

I shall never forget the horror of that moment, or Fortune’s wild screams as, unseated by the shock, she fell into the rushing stream, hat, basket, and books all swept away, and she herself only holding on to me with a clasp so tight that it almost dragged me into the water too.

But I stuck on, and held Fortune as fast as I could with one arm, while with the other I pushed Taffy on. Another moment and we were all three scrambling up the opposite bank, safe and sound, excepting for the fright and the wetting.

All we could do now was to make the best of our way home, and, luckily for Fortune, before we had gone many steps we met her father, alarmed at seeing Harold return without us, coming out in his gig in search of his child. She was lifted up into the trap and rolled up in the miller's great-coat, while I trotted on beside them, Taffy being overjoyed to be free of half his load.

What a warm welcome we found that night ! Judith was quite as disturbed as the miller, and had come down to the mill to see what could have happened ; and good Mrs. Mavor insisted on warming and drying me as well as Fortune, and giving us hot elder wine, and did not even scold us for having lost the basket and books, and left Jack behind, though certainly I do not know how we could have got home otherwise.

Harold was inclined to envy me when he heard of the hot elder wine, but better than that, better even than the miller's praises and Mrs. Mavor's motherly care, was the way with which Fortune ran up to me with outstretched arms before I went home that night, and flinging them round my neck

said, with a warm embrace, "Good night, dear kind Laurie, and thank you for bringing me safe home."

I was a little ashamed certainly, but all the same I went home quite proud and glad.





CHAPTER IV.

‘But who with mine his spirit blends,
As mine was blended with my brother’s?
When years of rapture glided by
The spring of life’s unclouded weather,
Our souls were knit, and thou and I,
My brother, grew in love together:
The chain is broke which bound us then—
Where shall I find its like agam?’



THE quick years had rolled by, smooth and uneventful in their course, as the happy days of childhood are; at least, as they appear to most of us when we look back upon them in after years and see them in the light of the storms and changes of youth and manhood.

Harold and I grew up in the old home looking down on the Severn sea, well cared for and sheltered from the sharper trials that come to some even in childhood, and it is with a tenderness and affection, which nothing can alter now, that I remember everything belonging to those days.

We grew up, I say, without any perceptible changes—any important event happening at Fairlie.

Judith still skimmed the boiler for dripping, still

scrubbed the floor as if she would wear through the boards by sheer force, and found all the girls in the valley not worth their salt. But she showed a rare wisdom in gradually relaxing the stern rule under which Harold and I had been brought up, and allowing us greater liberty, and so, in spite of Harold's high spirits and impetuous nature, he never came to a breach with Judith, or ever wavered for a moment in his respect and affection for her.

He had not honoured the Rockhead Academy during many years with his presence, and since he early showed a decided distaste to book-learning and as decided a turn for agriculture, he became my father's helper and right-hand man on the farm. A handsome, strong-limbed fellow he had become by this time, and was every day more and more father's pride and delight.

As for me, when my days at the Academy were over, I helped on the farm too, but spent my time mostly in reading books I had leave to borrow from the Hall library, and in dreaming over them.

I had in a great measure outgrown my lameness, so that it was little or no drawback to me now ; but when I look back upon that time of my life, I am afraid I was both selfish and idle, for I had contracted this bad habit of day-dreaming in my

childhood—not that I would say *thinking* is a bad habit in itself, but like everything else when it centres in self and does not lead into action, it is clear waste of brain and time. And while in my early boyhood my dreams were all magnificent schemes of usefulness—how best I could serve God and man and lead a high and noble life, now that I was older they were only how I could live pleasantly and comfortably for my own profit and pleasure—in a word, get the most I could out of life for myself. I loved to picture myself wealthy and popular, with a nice, pretty wife and a luxurious home, and of course wished Harold the same, for he and I were still as much as ever to each other, and never, we thought then, could either of us have a hope or wish that would cross the other.

People often wondered why father did not give me a trade or look out some new employment for me, especially as I was quick at books and given to study, but he always said, “Let the lads alone, there’s room for both o’ them in the house, and plenty to feed them with. And if one wants a wife, why there’s room here for her too, and if both o’ them wed, there’s houses enough in the valley; but that won’t happen while I’m here.” I often think though it would have been better for me if I had been put to some business,

and woke up out of my dreaming ways, and as it turned out this state of things could not last long.

Harold, not I, was the first to become dissatisfied. His high spirits and love of adventure could not find scope in the narrow limits of Silscote ; he was always longing to see more of the world and get beyond the hills which closed in our valley.

In the autumn, when the stag-hounds met on Exmoor, Harold was in his element, and became popular among gentry and farmers alike for his fearless riding and love of sport ; but when the stag-hunting season was over, he turned restless and impatient of home. Then, for the first time, father and he had disagreements about the farming and the men, and Harold, who was naturally hot-tempered, quarrelled with the old shepherd, who, much to father's disgust, went off in a pet.

It was not long after the shepherd left that Uncle Christopher came to stop at Fairlie. A visitor was a great rarity, and though we had often heard of Uncle Christopher, father's half-brother, he lived far away in Hampshire, and had never been to Fairlie within our recollection.

Great preparations were made for our guest's reception, the large bedroom so long untenanted was thrown open, the crimson hangings again brought to light, and Judith rubbed and rubbed at

the carved doors of the press and high-backed chairs till the old oak shone with a new polish.

Uncle Chris came, a little fat man with brass buttons on his broad waistcoat and a face that ran up into a thousand wrinkles whenever he laughed, which was not seldom. But although a great talker, he was shrewd enough and drove a good business as a horse-dealer, and boasted that he knew how to clench a bargain as well as most people.

I saw at once that he took a great fancy to Harold, and he would say to father, as he sat smoking his pipe in the chimney corner, "That's a fine fellow, that boy of yours, Jim. I wish he were mine, that's all I do," and then stick his hands in his pockets and chuckle to himself over the thought.

Harold liked him too, much to my surprise, partly I think because of his jovial ways and the jokes and stories he had always ready at hand, and a good deal because he had to do with horses, for which Harold always had a passion. And the two would sit and talk by the hour over horses and their breed, and paces and action, the prices such and such a gentleman would give for a hack to suit him, and who had the best hunters in the country, and this or that lord's racing stud.

All this I knew, but I was scarcely prepared for what happened when Uncle Chris had been at Faírlie a week.

I was in a field one afternoon looking after some digging that was going on, when Harold came striding down the hill and cleared the fence with a single bound till he stood at my side. His face was flushed and he spoke eagerly. "Laurie, boy," he said, "Uncle Chris wants me to go back with him. He has just been asking father."

"For how long?" I asked, with a dim foreboding as to what would come next.

"Oh, for good and all; you see he wants a man to help him and ride his nags, and it's a fine chance for me."

"Leave the valley for good and all!" I repeated, with a heavy feeling at my heart. "O Harold, do you really mean it?"

He looked disappointed. "Why, Laurie, it's just the sort of life I should like, and of course I'd come back and see you and father and Judith often enough, once a year or so, and we can't both live here all our lives. Besides, I'm turned one-and-twenty, and it's time I should put my hand to something."

"But what will father say? He'll never spare you," I said sorrowfully.

"Oh, he's willing. You'll do the farm, Laurie, just as well as ever I could, and then who knows but I'll come back in a few years, and set up horse-dealing on my own account. Don't take on, old

boy, you'll lead a merry life of it yet when I'm gone."

I shook my head, but I saw that Harold's mind was made up, and that go he would.

"The lad's set his heart on it," father said, "and there's no use in hindering him ; he'd best have his head and go where he likes. And Chris has no child of his own, and it wouldn't be fair to stand in the lad's way, when he might make his fortune."

Judith showed the most resentment on the whole, and gave Harold her mind pretty freely.

"I don't hold with it, Master Harold, I don't hold with it no-ways. Folks as can't bide at home satisfied don't never come to no good."

But she too accepted the fact when she found it was not to be avoided, and consoled herself by thinking that it was but natural after all in a boy of Harold's disposition.

"It's all along o' the horses ; he was always such a one for horses, Maister Harold—yes, yes," she would say, looking at him ; "thee'd best go ; but thee'll come back some day, mark my words, thee'll come back."

"I hope I shall," Harold would answer laughingly, "unless I break my neck, Judith, and then at least you'll have the consolation of knowing that your advice to stop at home was wisest."

So it was all settled, and Harold went off by the coach with uncle Christopher one morning.

I accompanied them to Rockhead, and stood watching Harold on his seat at the top of the coach as far as the corner where the road turns. Then I too turned back with a dull aching at my heart.

It was as if a sudden end had been put to this period of our life. The golden days of childhood were past, and the old time I felt instinctively could never come back again.

Harold might return and live at home once more, but we should never enjoy the innocent delicious freedom of companionship in which we had grown up together.

When we met again we should be men full of new hopes and new ambitions. Each of us would have passed through separate experiences, would have a life of which the other knew nothing. The undivided hand-in-hand existence we had led could no more be renewed, we could never again be the careless unconscious children we had been in the days when we grew up in the old home of the valley, and picked the primroses or played by the stream together.

I never knew how I had loved Harold till then. Dear old King! he too had been sorry to go at the last, for his spirits had suddenly failed him, he had

scarcely dared to look at me as he said good-bye, and wrung my hand with a grasp that seemed as if it would never undo again.

I could not bear the emptiness of the house, the sight of the table with dinner laid for only three; and as soon as the meal was over, a very cheerless silent one it was, I took my hat and wandered out down the valley, to nurse my grief alone. I had no wish to meet any one, and avoiding the path which led to the Old Mill, I plunged into the thickest part of the wood, and flung myself down upon the grass among the bracken that grew along the stream in the spot called the Waters' Meet.

It was the loneliest, loveliest spot in all the valley. Overhead the branches of the great ash trees met, turning themselves together in long, graceful tresses, and underneath a tangled growth of brushwood, of straggling roots and heather and dead bracken that mingled its russet with the green and gold of the gorse, sprang up and spread all matted and twisted together over the ground. It was spring-time; here and there a bank of wild hyacinths or a bough of crab-blossom caught the eye, and the primroses were everywhere carpeting the moss with their starry flowers.

Not a sound came to break the stillness, saving the babbling of the brook, as it ran merrily over the stones, fresh from the open moor, or the occa-

sional note of a thrush that went rustling through the thicket, as I lay there with the tall fern growing all round me, and looked into the amber tide of the waters that flowed under my eyes.

So life goes and youth runs away, I mused disconsolately to myself as I plucked the primrose blossoms and let them idly float down the stream, when suddenly my attention was caught by hearing my name pronounced.

I turned my head and saw Fortune Mavor standing on the clammer, as we call the log of wood thrown across the brook as a bridge, with her hands full of flowers.

"Ah, Laurence, I thought it was you," she said; "what are you doing down there in the grass?"

"I scarcely know myself," I said, half rising as I spoke; "but don't move, Fortune, stay where you are. You don't know what a pretty picture you make with the branches bending all over you."

I think she did know though, for she stood for some minutes on the clammer, her dainty feet delicately poised on the moss-grown log, and one tress of fair hair escaping from under her hat to mingle with the periwinkles and glossy harts-tongue in her hands. A white handkerchief was loosely tied over her shoulders, and her red skirt made a pretty bit of colour under the leafy shadows which danced about her.

We were still on the old brother-and-sisterly footing, although we met seldom now ; and pushing back her roving locks as she spoke, she went on presently, "I'm afraid I am very untidy, but I've been among the brambles, hunting for roots. I wanted some of the white periwinkles for my garden."

Her laugh fell pleasantly on the silence, as she stood there looking at me with her deep blue eyes. They were the same as ever in their laughing azure, and I thought as I looked at her she was almost prettier at seventeen than even when we had first known her as a child. It was still the same delicate little form, slim and fairy-like in its prettiness ; the cheeks were as pink as china roses, and the hair, though darker in shade, had not lost its golden tinge.

"Fortune," I said, "do you know Harold is gone away?"

"Gone away!" she exclaimed ; "Harold? Why I thought you two could never live apart."

"I thought so too," I replied ; "but you see we were wrong. He has gone to live with Uncle Christopher, in Hampshire."

"Uncle Christopher!" said Fortune. "Ah, I know, the funny little man who was in church with you on Sunday. I saw you had visitors, and so I didn't like to speak to you. But may I come

across now and sit down by you to arrange my flowers? and then, you know, you can tell me all about it."

She came and sat down on the grass by me with all her flowers in her lap, and listened while I told her how I had seen Harold go that morning.

"Poor Laurence," she said softly; "it is very hard upon you, certainly, but I daresay Harold will soon get tired of the horses and stupid Uncle Chris."

It was a hope from which I did not glean much consolation, but it was pleasant to be comforted by Fortune, and I let her prattle on.

"I tell you what, Laurence, you must come and see us very often now, that is all, and so the time will run away fast, till Harold comes back."

"But I shall be busy now, Fortune, much busier than I have ever been before, now Harold will not be here to look after the men."

"Well, that is only in the day-time. In the evenings you can come and have supper and read to us, like you did last winter, about the Queen of the May, the pretty story about the girl who was going to die, and which mother liked so much."

"Thank you, Fortune," I said, "you are always kind to me, and your mother too."

"No one can help being kind to you, Laurie, when you are so good and clever and gentle; why,

you have always been like a brother to me. And now Harold is gone I mean to be a great deal kinder to you than I have ever been before. But now get up, and carry these ferns for me, for I must be going home, or else mother will scold me for being late."

I took the plants, and as we walked home together I thought that all the sunshine had not vanished out of life for me, even though Harold was gone.





CHAPTER V.

"It is the miller's daughter,
And she has grown so dear, so dear."



HAROLD'S departure made a great change in my life in more ways than one. There was no time for dreaming now. I scarcely ever even opened a book. From morning till night I was abroad helping among the sheep on the hill-side, or working with the men in the valley, as hay-time, harvest, and cider-brewing followed each other in succession.

Father had aged rapidly in the last year or two, and became daily more infirm and less capable of active employment, though he liked to walk through the fields and see the labour that was going on. So the chief of the farm-work fell upon me, and I began to find this life full of interest. The improvement of the land, the furtherance of everything which could tend to the good of the labourers on the farm, were objects which engrossed my thoughts and proved the most absorbing of occupations. I

felt the old ambitions of my childhood awaking within my breast, as one scheme of usefulness after another occupied my attention, and in Sir Guy we had a landlord ever ready to co-operate with his tenant in any enterprise likely to benefit either land or cottagers.

He was breaking fast, the fine old gentleman, and rarely left the Hall now, but more than once he sent for me on farm business, and would say as I left, "Ah, Laurence, tell your father I must have you for my own tenant some day ; mine or Edmond's that is to say, for my tether is pretty well run out now."

Of Harold we heard but seldom. He was never much of a scholar, but when he did write it was always good news he gave us, saying what fine horses Uncle Christopher had, how well they sold, and what a pleasant country Hampshire was.

But he never talked of coming home, and when, after a whole year and a half's absence, I wrote to urge his coming, his only reply was a hurried note to say he would try and get away in the spring, but it could not be at present. But when the spring came he was in Yorkshire, whither he had gone with some hunters to a horse-show, and father began to say the lad would never come home again. He did write from York though, and say

he was longing to see the old place once more, and if he lived till Christmas he would come then.

So the third year of Harold's absence wore on and I was already one-and-twenty. All that time Fortune Mavor had been true to her word, and never changed in her kindness to me. But I saw her seldom, for besides that my time was fully taken up, she was often out with friends and young people, and, as was natural at her age, was fond of dancing and company. She was quite the beauty of the valley now, and many were the lads who courted her, and numerous the tales of what such and such a one would not do for the sake of a smile from Fortune Mavor.

Judith, who had never quite got over her old prejudice against Fortune, used to try and instil suspicions into my mind by occasionally retailing reports of the valley gossip; but I always silenced her by saying that Fortune had never altered in her behaviour towards me, whatever she might be to others.

Only at times it made me a little sad to think that Fortune had all the young men of the county round at her feet, and that if she were kind to me, it could only be in compassion for my lameness, and a little too for old acquaintance sake.

It was now September, and the first meet of the stag-hounds was fixed to take place on Clytsall

Hill, just above the valley. Clytsall meet was always a great event, and on fine days the whole valley would turn out on the hills for the occasion.

Still and brilliant dawned the morning, warm and dazzling came the sunshine, scattering the white mists that shrouded hill and moor, and from Rockhead and Wenlock, from far away across Exmoor, the hunters came pouring out. Not only riders and sportsmen, but vehicles of every kind, gigs and carts and any conveyance that could be rigged up for the occasion, were driving along the Silscote road, full of country people, all bent on enjoying a holiday and a fine morning on the hills.

Father stood at the end of the lane, under the great walnut-tree, watching the pleasure seekers pass, and exchanging greetings with the valley-folk.

"What, lad," he said, as I passed him, driving a horse and cart that had been to Silscote with a load of hay, "you here still, on the day of Clytsall meet, and such a morning as it is?"

I explained that I was busy, but he would not hear of excuses, and to say truth, although since Harold went I had not cared to follow the hounds, I did not need much pressing this morning.

"Come, take Harold's grey; she wants a bit of exercise, and a gallop over the moor will do her and you too a world o' good. Quick, now, be off with you, it's ill enough that my hunting-days are

over, and it would be a sore pity if 'twere said there's not an Isham in the field."

Once on horse-back, and riding up the declivity that led towards Clytsall, I could not repent, for the hills were steeped in a wealth of colour such as even I had rarely seen. The oaks had caught their first tinge of red and gold, and the ground was crimson and purple with the luxuriant bloom of heather. Over the woods and in their blue hollows wreaths of mist still hung, shadowed here and there by a passing cloud that floated along, and far away below stretched the valley, reaching out to a sea dotted over with white sails, and closed in by the coast of Wales, that shone glittering in the sunlight.

The glory of the autumn morning, the freshness of the hill breezes stirred my blood, and I felt new life glowing within me as the good grey trotted up the steep hill-side.

Clytsall fields were already covered with groups of mounted horsemen in bright scarlet, and a crowd of people on foot, eagerly awaiting the moment when the "tufters" would be put in to rouse the red-deer from his lair in the brushwood, and the yelping of the hounds announced their arrival at the farm, where cider and bread and cheese were passing freely to and fro between the huntsmen.

I rode towards a row of carriages drawn up on

the edge of the wood, and made straight for an open cart in which I recognised familiar faces. The Malsbury girls were there, from Crockford, just over the valley, with their young brothers, and Peggy Winter, the carpenter's daughter, and Fortune was there too, in a broad straw hat tied on with rose-coloured ribbons that set off her blue eyes and bright hair to great advantage.

They welcomed me gaily, and I stayed by them in hopes of getting a few words with Fortune, whom I had not seen for some time.

Dick Winter, Peggy's cousin, the son of the rich farmer of Ruccambe, a mile or two beyond Silcote, was by her side, trying to occupy her attention ; but she did not seem to care for his attentions, which I was glad of, for Dick was an idle, noisy fellow, with a very high opinion of his own importance ; and she bent over the side of the cart, talking to me in a low voice.

"Do you know, Laurence, I never see you now," she said ; "I think you are very faithless to your old friends." There was an accent of tender reproach in her tones which at once pleased and surprised me. It emboldened me to reply—

"It is not that I am faithless, Fortune, but you have so many friends now I cannot expect to see as much of you as when we were children. If I do

not come to the mill oftener, it is because I am afraid of being troublesome."

She looked up at me with a quick glance from under her drooping eye-lids, and then let them fall again.

"Silly Laurie," she said in her playful way, "is that all? You ought to know better. I was away last month, but now I mean to stop at home, and I tell you what, if you don't come to see us, I shall come and see you. How is your father?"

I told her about my father and his anxiety to see Harold again, and she listened with a look of gentle interest and sympathy, though she did not say much.

"Do come back," she said presently, "when you have had hunting enough; we mean to stop here all day and have dinner out on the grass, and you might ride home this way. I get so tired of Dick and those boys," she added, dropping her voice, "and then you shall come in to tea at the mill with mother. Say you will, Laurence, *do*."

I could not say no to an invitation so persuasively urged, even though I had a lurking consciousness that father would be impatient for my return.

Just as I had assented, there was a bark from one of the tufters, a moment of eager expectation, and all eyes were turned to one direction, as a noble stag came crashing through the underwood, shaking

his antlers as he bounded out on to the hill-side, his fine proportions clearly seen against the sky-line, and sped over the open moor with the swiftness of an arrow.

Then came the shout, the deep bark of the hounds, and the rush of horsemen to the front. The merry music of the horn rang out on the air, and with a parting wave of the hand to Fortune I was following in the chase as fast as the good grey could carry me. I never remember enjoying a day's hunting as I did that one. There was a gladness in my heart, a joyous excitement which did not come from the splendid morning only, or the keen pleasure of riding alongside with the hounds. A new power, a new life seemed to have glowed in my veins, since I had spoken those few words with Fortune. I did not follow far that day, and the sun had not sunk low in the western heaven when I retraced my steps past Clytsall, and rode over the now deserted hill-side, scanning the scene in all directions.

I had not far to seek. They were all there, the merry party I had left in the morning, strolling in groups of twos and threes among the heather; and I got off my horse, and slipping the reins over my arm, guided the grey carefully down the rocky path that led down through the wood.

Peggy Winter and Kate Malsbury hailed me,

gladly eager for news of the hunt ; but as I walked by them, it was a little trying to my feelings to see Dick Winter—who, by-the-by, would not hunt that day—on in front with Fortune, apparently in earnest conversation with her.

I forgave her though, when as we reached the valley she fell back, and resting her hand on the grey's mane, walked by my side along the stream that ran golden in the evening sunlight, between its banks of green fern and dusky heather.

We talked of old times, of days when we had played together here, and hidden under the hazel branches and laughed till the echoes rang again.

"Do you remember the first day I ever saw you, Laurence?" she said. "I had not been at Silscote many days, and I thought it was rather dull after the town, and began to wish for playmates, and then I saw you and Harold coming along the bank."

"Yes," I said, "it was a little further down, I know the exact spot. You were sitting on the bridge, singing. That was a long time ago."

"It is a long time," said Fortune, pensively, leaning her head against my horse's shoulder, till her fair hair touched its long mane.

"And you have not forgotten, Fortune?"

The look in her eyes again sent a thrill through me, but the others were calling to us, and Fortune never answered my question. We had a lively

tea-party at the Old Mill that evening, and I did not go home till dark.

Was it only a fancy of mine, or was it really that Fortune dropped her eyes with a soft shyness new to her, and that her hand lingered in mine a moment as I said good-night ?

No, when I think over it, I am sure it was not a fancy.





CHAPTER VI.

“What is love, that all the world

Talk so much about it?

What is love, that neither you

Nor I can do without it?

What is love, that it should be

As changeful as the weather?

Is it joy, or is it pain,

Or is it both together?”

THAT Michaelmas the valley was excited by a dance given at the Manor House by Farmer Malsbury, my father's old bachelor friend, for his growing-up nephews and nieces, the young Malsburys, of Crockford.

He had sold two years' wool. and his heifer had won the first prize at Taunton Cattle Show; so the old gentleman thought it time to give his friends a share in his good luck, and all the valley were invited, or, perhaps I should rather say, all the farmers of the valley and those tradespeople who, like the miller and carpenter's families were privileged to associate with the aristocracy of Silscote

Father and I were asked, and, strange to say, I was going. Father looked surprised when he heard me say I thought of going, and Judith opened her eyes so wide the wonder was they did not crack.

"Going to a dance! Thee going to a dance! lawk-a-mercy! I think my senses are leaving me for good and a'."

No one was more surprised than myself, for what with my lameness, and a natural shyness and dislike to strangers, I had never in my life spent an evening away from home anywhere but at the mill, and certainly never tried to dance a step. But this time I was resolved to go.

And as soon as Judith saw that I was really in earnest, she lent herself to equip me for the occasion with a zeal and assiduity for which I was scarcely prepared. My coat, my boots, my tie must all be of the most faultless pattern; indeed, she was at great pains to prove to me that it was absolutely necessary I should appear in a flowered white satin waistcoat she had found in the recesses of the oaken press; but this I resisted, and she had to content herself with choosing me a tie of the most delicate silver grey the shops of Rockhead could supply, and a pair of lavender kid gloves to match. She herself insisted on giving my collar an extra starch, and at the last moment produced an exquisite sprig of myrtle and geranium leaf,

which she placed in my button-hole, and then stood looking at me meditatively, with her arms a-kimbo and a searching gaze bent upon me.

"Why do you look at me so, Judith?" I said, growing uneasy under her severe inspection. "Have you never seen a man in his Sunday best before, or is it that I am so fine you don't know me again?"

"An' why shouldn't I look on thee, an' thee sa spick and span as if every bit on thee came out o' band-box fresh from Taunton town?" said Judith, tartly. "But na, laddie," she added presently, "it's na that. I look on thee, and I sees thee. But there's summut more behind it; it isn't for nothing that thee's so fine to-night, laddie, bless thee. Poor old Judith's not so blind as a' that. That she isn't."

"I don't know what you are talking about, Judith," I said with a laugh, which I felt to be rather awkward; "but good night now, and go to bed, for I have the house key, and am going to lock you in."

Most of the company had already arrived when I reached Farmer Malsbury's house. Such a shaking of hands, such chattering and unpinning of shawls, and running about of maids with armfuls of wraps and cloaks was going on in the entrance hall of the old Manor House, where the farmer was receiving

his guests, as one muffled figure after another stepped down from gig or sociable.

In striking contrast to this bustle and stir, and to the bluff, homely greeting of the honest old bachelor, was the circle of ladies belonging to the tip-top aristocracy of the valley, who stood round the fire in the next room, personages who never addressed each other excepting as ma'am, and exchanged stiff courtesies and phrases of studied politeness that sounded as if they had come straight out of the "Manual of Etiquette," or "Polite Letter-writer."

I shrank back with a return of childish terrors from this formidable assembly, especially when I caught sight of the Miss Cockshots, of Ruccambe, two maiden ladies who were the mirrors of fashion and high breeding, and whose presence here was in itself a mark of condescension, since the clergy visited them and a distant cousin of theirs was even said to have married a baronet's nephew.

There they were, however, in feathers and lace, a height of elegance to which no one else dared aspire, beautiful, yet awful to behold; and I was glad to slip past them and hide myself by a tall young Malsbury who stood in a corner, in the agonies of forcing a fat, red thumb into a white glove at least a size and a half too small for him.

From my retreat I caught sight of Mrs. Mavor, whose kindly beaming face it was a relief to meet

amid all this splendour, and made my way as soon as I could towards her.

"What, Laurence, you here!" she said in her motherly way. "I'm as pleased as Punch to find you, for Fortune's dancing, and David's gone to smoke a pipe in the kitchen with Mr. Winter, and I don't much fancy the fine folk in the parlour."

"Are they dancing already?" I said, looking in the direction from which the sounds of music came.

"Yes; they haven't been at it long. Come, you should be there too, Laurie," said kind Mrs. Mavor.

"Not I; I can't dance," I replied, beginning to feel awkward and remembering my lame leg.

"Not dance!" said Mrs. Mavor. "I'll be bound you'd foot it as nice as any if you once began. It seems a pity you shouldn't have a try. But, never mind, we'll go in and have a look at them all the same."

We went in together, and a pretty sight it was as I can ever remember. The dancers stood in files all down the long room, as the oak-pannelled chamber of the Manor House, to-day decorated with ever-green wreaths and garlands, was called, the girls pleasant to look at, with their light-coloured dresses and bright faces, while their partners stood opposite only waiting the signal to begin. Fortune was there, gayest of the gay, all a flutter of pink ribbons and smiles, and the tall guardsman in uniform

opposite, a stranger who had come with the Winters, could scarcely take his eyes off her.

Then the music struck up. Jasper, who led the fiddles at church, and that other hero of my childhood the man with the double bass, being foremost among the performers, and off the dancers went, whirling round in couples, crossing hands, and then leading off down the middle and back again. Some danced oddly enough to be sure. Dick Winter had a way of kicking up his heels, which struck me as highly dangerous to his neighbours, and the tall colour-sergeant reminded me of nothing so much as of a great lumbering cart-horse that takes half an hour to turn round, the more so that he had Fortune for his partner, who danced like a bird. But all alike went at it with a will, and as I looked I felt the passion catching me, and for the first time in my life wished I too could dance.

As the evening went by it was provoking to see all the other men going up to Fortune by turns, and all enjoying the privilege of dancing with her. I could have knocked Dick Winter down for the conceited way in which he walked up and down the room with Fortune hanging on his arm, and I half wished I had not come there at all; but then between the dances she would return to her mother and always have a pleasant word and smile for me.

She had just come up from a round of the polka, breathless and panting, and was fanning herself with her handkerchief and talking to her last partner, when Farmer Malsbury himself came down the room to see the fun, and called to the musicians to strike up *Ou voulez-vous danser*.

"Come, Mrs. Mavor," he said, advancing to offer his hand to the miller's wife, "come, we'll teach the young ones how to foot it yet." He would hear of no refusal, and was walking off to the top of the room when he caught sight of me where I stood, biting my lips and grumbling over my fate, against the wall.

"What, youngster," he called out to me, "have you the face to stand there dawdling when an old fellow like me is turning out his toes and bringing out his best airs and graces?"

I began to mutter an excuse, but the farmer would admit of none. "You just stop palavering, and turn round and choose your gal. Why there's 'Melia Price or my Katy only waiting for a partner."

There was no escaping now, but 'Melia squinted hideously, and Katy, though a good girl enough, was not the one for me. I saw Dick Winter making a rush across the room to where Fortune sat, and quick as lightning I had turned to her and was saying, pleadingly,

"Fortune, will you dance this with me?"

"Of course, Laurence," was her answer, "how good of you to ask me."

She stood up, and I led her out to the-top of the room in the eyes of Dick, who looked very discomfited and crestfallen, and had to fall back on poor 'Melia.

The gay tune struck up, and I found myself dancing away with a will and an energy that surprised all the world, and, more than all, myself. I had forgotten my shyness, forgotten my lame leg, and was as lithe and active a dancer as any that evening. Even Fortune wondered.

"Why, Laurie," she said, "you must never tell us again that you can't dance."

Nor was that all. When the dance was over, Farmer Malsbury led the way with Mrs. Mavor, regardless of the fuming and fretting of the Miss Cockshots, whose feathers and lace must have felt very much left out in the cold, into the parlour where supper was spread. Fortune and I followed, and sat down in front of the great boar's head, while the rest of the company flocked in after us to partake of the sumptuous entertainment, awaiting them.

Silver tankards were handed round, brimming over with ale and cider, the tables groaned under the weight of rounds of beef, raised pork pies, hams

and pasties, plum-puddings, custards, and jellies of wondrous devices. Every one pronounced it to be an excellent supper, and conversation and mirth flowed as freely as the good old ale from Farmer Malsbury's barrels. And I, sitting by Fortune's side, was gayest of the gay, merriest among the merry. I told stories, joked with Dick Winter and the old Farmer, and made Kate Malsbury, who sat on the other side of me, laugh till the tears ran down her cheeks.

Then we went back to the dancing, and I danced away with the rest till the musicians were nodding over their instruments as they played "We won't go home till morning," and did not leave till I had lifted Fortune up into the miller's cart, and wrapped her cloak tight round her as she whispered her last good night.

A thousand new hopes, a thousand impulses I had never known before were circling in my brain as I walked home in the keen frosty air of the early morning.

For the first time, then, I seriously thought of making Fortune Mavor my wife, and pictured to myself how bright she would make my home, and how readily she would enter into all my plans and dreams of usefulness. I had heard people call her a spoilt child before now, and say that she was cold and selfish, but to-night I felt surer than ever that this

was all slander and envious talk. At least, it should not hinder me for a moment in my intention of showing her all I felt, and asking her if she could love me in return.

My meditations were put an end to by finding Judith sitting up waiting for me at home.

I scolded her good-naturedly for giving herself this unnecessary trouble, lighted a candle, and wished her good night.

But still she stood there, looking askance at me, her sharp features, bony arms, and keen eyes one note of interrogation.

"Well, Judith," I said a little impatiently, "what is the matter, why don't you go to bed?"

"But how about the dance, laddie? thee started glad enough, and now thee comes back as if thee'd been at a burying. Either thee's worried, or else thee's in love, an' which o' the twain it is I'd not be sorry to know."

"Stop, Judith," I said, "don't ask me any more questions, for I won't answer them; but this I promise you, that if ever I am going to be married I will tell you first of all." And with this Judith had to go to bed satisfied.

But it was many a long year she had to wait before that promise was fulfilled.



CHAPTER VII.

"Over the grass we stepped unto it,
And God knoweth how blithe we were;
Never a voice to bid us eschew it,
Hey the green ribbon that showed so fair.
Sing on! we sing in the glorious weather,
Till one steps over the tiny strand,
So narrow, in sooth, that still together,
On either brink we go hand in hand."

THE day after Farmer Malsbury's dance all other thoughts were forgotten in the news which broke with morning over the valley.

Sir Guy was dead. He had been as well as usual the night before, but had been found dead in his bed this morning.

Sir Guy dead! The news passed from lip to lip as the tolling-bell sent forth its solemn message over hill and valley, and every one stopped work to grieve over the sad tidings.

The good master, the fine old gentleman who had lived among us for more than three-fourths of

a century, was gone. We should never see him again riding up the valley on his white pony, never watch, as he came out of farm or cottage, for his kindly greeting. Every one felt as if they had lost a father. Tears rolled down my father's weather-beaten cheeks to think Sir Guy was gone, and he said to me—

“Ah, lad, now he is gone, I shall be the next to follow. And it may be I shan't have long to wait. He was aye a good master to me, and I'd gladly serve him over again up yonder, even if it's true there's neither landlord nor tenant there.”

Even the laughter of little children who played under the walnut-tree was silenced, and they spoke in whispers over their games. The hush of death had fallen upon them too, and the grief which darkened the threshold of the Hall threw a shadow on their young lives.

A few days afterwards a long funeral train wound all along the valley and up the hill-side to the pretty churchyard where Sir Guy was carried by his oldest labourers to be laid in the vault of his ancestors, which had last been opened to receive his dear-loved son.

Every tenant, farmer or cottager, who rented an acre or house in the valley, followed in the long procession, and the churchyard was filled with women and children, all with a bit of black, if it

were only a narrow strip, a handkerchief or ribbon to show their respect for "Sir Guy."

It was a sunny autumn day, and the mountain-ash hung its clusters of scarlet berries over the churchyard gate, and the peaceful light of the afternoon sunshine threw a radiance on the last sheaves of golden grain which stood ready-cut on the hillside, emblem of the ripe old age, the rich fruitfulness in good works of him whom we had borne, full of years and honour, to rest with his fathers.

Full of such thoughts, I walked back to Fairlie with father and Farmer Malsbury, who were reminding each other of what Sir Guy had been in his college days, and going back to Sir Guy's father and grandfather.

The last few days I had been continually engaged in helping Sir Guy's steward, Mr. Mayne, and taking orders and messages to and from Rockhead and one part or another of the valley, and I was glad of an afternoon's leisure to look round home, and arrange my scattered thoughts, which felt confused and bewildered ever since the evening of the Manor-house dance.

I had half a mind to step down to the mill and see Fortune, whom I had not set eyes on since that night, and with this intention went out of the garden gate. As I closed it I caught sight of a

figure coming up the lane, and waited, thinking it might be some one from the Hall. The sun shone straight in my eyes, and I could distinguish nothing clearly ; but as the figure drew near me something struck me as familiar both in the form and walk, and I looked again. Suddenly a flash of recognition broke upon me ; I let the gate fall behind me, and in another minute was at Harold's side. For he it was ; and there was no mistaking the cheery voice that said—

“Ah, Laury boy, I thought I'd take you by surprise. You didn't know, did you, as you stood staring down the lane, who the stranger was coming to invade you? Well, how are father, Judith, and all? It seems an age since I saw you last.”

“O Harold ! this is a pleasure. I never dreamt it was you. But come home, come up home ; father *will* be glad.”

We walked together up the lane, Harold resting his hand on my shoulder in the old way.

“But what brings you back so suddenly, Harold?” I asked, after the first moments of delighted surprise were over. “No bad news, I trust?”

“Nothing but this, Laurie. I had a bit of a row with uncle Chris over a horse that was worth a goodish bit, and who came down in the hunting field, worse luck for me, and broke both knees.

He never forgave me for it, and I wasn't going to be slanged by him, and so, the long and short of it is, I left him and thought I'd come home. I was tired of him, and he of me; and I wanted to see the old place again, so I started early, and after half a dozen changes I got to Taunton and came on by the coach."

"And don't you mean to go back?" I asked, divided between pleasure and fear of what father would think.

"Not I," said Harold. "I've had enough of the old chap. He's a low, cringing fellow, Uncle Chris, though he can speak fair enough, and knows a rare lot about horses, else I wouldn't have stood him so long."

"O Harold! if you can only stop at home, it will be worth anything," I said joyfully.

"We'll get on well enough, Laurie boy; and if there isn't work for us both I will take another farm of my own. Sir Guy would give me one, I——"

"Hush, Harold!" I said, interrupting him; "don't you know Sir Guy is dead, and we've just been to his funeral?"

"Ah, yes, I did hear it at Rockhead, poor old gentleman. It was strange to get off the coach there, and see all the old faces, and when I walked up here and saw the valley and Durstone rocks, and

the sea coming in, I wondered how I could have stopped away so long."

"Over two years it is, Harold ; it will be three next spring. But how altered you are, Harold, taller than ever, I declare," said I, looking with pride at his breadth of shoulder and manly figure.

"Not for the worse? That's right, Laurie boy," said Harold, with good-humoured satisfaction. "Six foot and half an inch I stand in my stockings now. But there's Judith's blue apron, and father sitting in the kitchen too." And he bent his tall head to pass under the clematis that hung over the porch, and went in.

Father's joy and astonishment at the sight of his boy knew no bounds ; and though he was a little troubled when he heard of the quarrel with Uncle Christopher that had led to Harold's leaving, he was too much overjoyed to look at Harold's face again to vex himself for long together.

"It's like old times to hear the boy sing about the house again," he said ; "and it's as well he's come back, for it takes two to do the farm work, and I shan't be here long now the old master's in his grave."

The next day Harold had enough to do in seeing all the changes that had taken place in his absence, the varied alterations and improvements on the farm, the new barn on the hill, the piece of moor I

had enclosed, the cottages which Sir Guy had built on the waste. It was a new pleasure to show it him all, and hear the admiring approval with which he looked at repairs and improvements, and his surprise at what he called my energy and activity.

But in the evening I remembered Fortune, and told him I thought I must step down to the mill and see the Mavors. I was not sure if he himself would care to leave father, and waited to see what he would say.

"They have been kind to you, have they?" he asked carelessly, and I was warm in my description of Mrs. Mavor's goodness.

"Ah, you always liked Fortune too, Laurie," he said; "you understood women's ways better than I did. But I think I'll step down with you to-night. The old folk might take it amiss if I did not look them up, and small blame to them if they did, for they were always friendly to us as boys, and I haven't yet forgotten Mrs. Mavor's tea-cakes and whortleberry tarts."

I was delighted with this proposal, and we walked down together past the darkened Hall, where the hatchment hung over the front door, and along the trout stream to the Old Mill.

Harold was telling me of his travels and riding adventures, and hearing from me in return of Farmer Malsbury's dance last week.

He laughed heartily at the idea of my dancing, and praised the old farmer's hospitality ; but what I could not tell him was, how Fortune had made the real charm of the evening, and how dear she had gradually become to me.

I wanted to explain it all to him too, but somehow it was difficult to talk of, and the right words would not come.

We had reached the mill now, and could see the lights in the window and Mrs. Mavor's frilled cap with a certain little bended head at her side. On the door step the miller himself met us with a cordial welcome.

"Why, if it isn't Harold come back again!" was Mrs. Mavor's exclamation, "grown so tall I should scarcely remember him! I know who's happy though to-night, Laurie," she continued. "That was it, was it, which made you so gay the other night, though you kept the good news all to yourself, sly boy that you are?"

Fortune had left her corner and shook hands shyly with Harold, and then crept back again to her work, half abashed, it seemed to me, at the frank look of admiration with which he greeted her.

He was given the place of honour in the high-backed arm-chair, with its uncomfortable elbows, familiar to us since Mrs. Grindley's days, and entertained by the miller and his wife, while I took my

usual seat by Fortune and chatted easily by the fireside.

I thought I liked her like this in her simple print gown, with the firelight catching her hair and making it shine with stray gleams of gold as she bent over her work, better even than in her gay attire of the other night.

And she was full of pretty, playful, little ways, showing me her work, a cushion she was embroidering in manifold colours, and telling me how she liked fancy work, but hated darning stockings; although, indeed, she had a pile of her father's—*that* high—lying upstairs waiting to be mended.

It was just the same with the house work, the cooking, and baking, Fortune never could bear it, and that was one reason why Judith could not understand her; making preserves was the only thing of the kind for which she had patience—that she knew how to do she told me naïvely, and really I must taste some of the apricot jam she had made last summer, it was so very nice.

Fancy work and making preserves, I thought to myself as she prattled on, that is just what this dainty creature was fit for, and I made up my mind that *my* wife should never have stockings to darn or puddings to bake.

And best of all, I liked her for saying, with one of her charming little airs, "I am afraid I am very

lazy, mother always says I am ; I don't know why, but I can't exactly help it." And her little rippling laugh sounded more silvery and sweeter than ever.

I could see Harold admired her, for though he scarcely spoke to her, I saw his honest eyes fixed upon her from where he sat on the other side of the table. Every now and then, too, Fortune's blue eyes peeped up from her work as if curious to see what Harold was like now, and I felt unmixed satisfaction at the feeling how handsome he must appear to her ; for of course I wanted her to like my Harold and be very fond of him.

He was quite pleased with his evening there, and as we went home said to me—

"It was a good idea of yours, Laurie, going to the Mavors. They're good sort of folk, and as kind-hearted as any I know."

A few minutes afterwards he said again—

"What a pretty girl Fortune has grown up, too, not a bit spoilt either, but as natural and fresh as when she was a child." And he ran on in his frank, boyish way to tell me of the strange fashions he had met with among townspeople, and the conquests he had made of pretty girls, and the attentions he had received. Dear old King ! how I liked to hear him talk, and I went to bed quite light-hearted, feeling ten years younger now that Harold had come home.



CHAPTER VIII.

"I know a maiden fair to see,
Take care!
She can both false and friendly be,
Beware! beware!
And she has hair of a golden hue,
Take care!
And what she says, it is not true,
Beware! beware!"



HAROLD had come back again and brought sunshine with him into the old home. Judith said that it did one's heart good only to look at the boy, and the labourers worked with a will if Master Harold was by. And to me it was like living over again the happy days of childhood, with a joy deepened and rendered more precious for the years of parting that had come to us since then. Uncle Christopher had soon after Harold's return written a letter that sounded like an apology, and made us all feel that he felt himself more to blame in the matter than might have been supposed. This satisfied father as to Harold's abrupt departure, and so we were all happy together.

Of that spring I have an especially lively recollection; for Mrs. Mavor had been ill at Christmas, and Fortune had gone away with her for a change, and did not come back till after Easter, when the days were lengthening and the woods all breaking into leaf.

What pleasant evenings we used to have down at the mill that May time talking together in the garden, all three as happy and light-hearted as if the years had rolled back and we were the children who hunted for primroses and played at hide-and-seek along the trout stream banks.

Sometimes I know I used to wish a little I could get a word or two alone with Fortune, for I never liked her so well as when no one else was by, and now, though we saw each other most evenings, we seemed somehow to be further apart than last Michaelmas before Harold came. He, indeed, was more at the mill than I was, for the farm management had fallen so much upon me in his absence that it seemed natural I should continue to direct things, and Harold had taken a lazy fit and was glad of rest and leisure after his busy time with Uncle Christopher. But all the while, deep down in my heart, I had a deliberate purpose of one day asking Fortune Mavor to be my wife, and only waited till a favourable opportunity both of seeking her consent and of setting up for myself presented

itself. Till that time I determined to say nothing of my intentions to any one, not even to Harold, for fear it might render things awkward for Fortune.

Meanwhile she grew brighter and gladder every day, her step was more elastic than ever, and her laugh fell on the ear like the ripple of sunny waters. She used to sing too in her clear, bird-like voice, sing to us on warm evenings when we sat out in the porch of the Old Mill under the jessamine and fuchsias, and then make me read beautiful poetry to her and Harold. What struck me as strange was, that she always chose the saddest things, and used to sit listening with tears coming into her eyes, while Harold would stand a little way off, looking at her in his grave, quiet way. He was generally the most silent of the three, but then he never was a great talker, so that was nothing to wonder at. Whitsuntide came, and all along the valley the fruit-trees were white with blossom, and the blue forget-me-nots grew in the long grass by the mill. The lilacs and laburnums hung in rich profusion out of the hedges, and the passion-flower had already budded all over the porch at Fairlie. A lovely June it was, and I remember yet the dewy fragrance and the starry splendours of those nights when we used to linger on the bridge to hear Fortune's good night.

One evening Harold had gone to Rockhead to

see a horse that he thought of buying for a gentleman who lived some miles off, and had not yet returned. We had done supper, and I thought I would go down to the mill all the same. It would be pleasant to have a few words alone with Fortune, and perhaps I might be able at last to tell her what I longed to say. So I walked down the lane, leaving word with Judith where I had gone, in case Harold came in soon.

As I drew near the mill I heard a voice singing. It was Fortune sitting on that very bridge, where years ago Harold and I had first surprised her, sitting there all by herself singing. Only the song she sang was different, and as I stopped under the hazel branches these were the words that fell on my ear :

"I saw from the beach, when the morning was shining,
A bark o'er the waters move gloriously on,
I came when the sun o'er that beach was declining,
The bark was still there, but the waters were gone.

"Ah, such is the fate of our life's early promise,
So passing the spring-tide of youth we have known ;
Each wave that we danced on at morning ebbs from us,
And leaves us at eve on the bleak shore alone.

"Ne'er tell me of glories serenely adorning
The close of our day, the calm eve of our night ;
Give me back, give me back the wild freshness of morning,
Her clouds and her tears are worth evening's best light."

It was a sad song for her to sing, and there was

a passionate ring in her voice as she dwelt on the last words, which sounded strange in my ears. I had never seen Fortune deeply moved by anything, and the sadness in her voice filled me with a new tenderness. I moved forward, and saw her start at the sound of footsteps and turn with a sudden light in her eyes, but as I stepped on to the bridge her face fell, and she gave a forced, uneasy sort of laugh.

"O Laurence, how you frightened me," she said, "I could not think who it was. You are late to-night."

"Yes, I was waiting for Harold, he is gone to Rockhead in Mr. Winter's cart, and isn't back yet," I said.

Fortune made no remark, and presently I said, "That was a sad song you were singing, Fortune, just now."

"Was it?" she said, carelessly playing with a branch of acacia flower that she held in her hand. "I like the tune."

I looked at her, puzzled as to whether the air of indifference was assumed or not. Somehow she did not seem quite natural to me this evening. But I continued—

"You at least are too young to say yet, 'Give me back, give me back the light of the morning.' And yet there are days in life that seem so good

when one looks back at them, that one would gladly recall them if one could."

I sighed, and Fortune looked uneasily around her.

"Do you know, Laurence, it is getting cold out here, and I feel chilly, let us come indoors."

I looked at her in surprise. It was a warm night, and Fortune always declared she was never cold, and would sit for hours out in the garden quite late without a shawl.

I offered to fetch one for her, but she refused, and I could only follow her into the house. Mrs. Mavor welcomed me cordially as ever, and Fortune seemed to exert herself to say kind things, but I did not stay long, and walked up home wondering what was the matter with her.

Was she changed? or was it only a shyness that had come over her this evening? Of one thing I was quite certain, that she had become very dear to me, since the slightest change in her manner troubled me so much. I wished I could have told her so this evening; but another time I would manage better, and once for all try my fate with her.

Harold had not yet returned, he was very late to-night, and I sat waiting in the porch long after father and Judith had gone to bed.

What a night it was! O how the moonlight shone

on the roofs and stems of the trees, sweeping everything clear and golden, and taking all the colour, the warm human life, out of field and moor, to turn it one cold passionless tone of glittering white.

How the nightingales sang, answering each other from the thicket and the shady parts of the lane! And as I listened their song seemed to wake my deepest heart-dreams into life.

What happy evenings we should have when Fortune was once my wife, and I should lead her home to gladden my father's old age, and be a sister to Harold. How I should work then, cheered and strengthened with the thought of the welcome awaiting me at night, and the thankfulness for all the blessings poured upon me. I should never be sad or down-hearted then, and we should lead the happiest of lives together.

So, in pleasant dreams of future joys, I spent the long waiting time, and was beginning to think Harold must have been detained at Rockhead, when I heard his footstep coming up the lane.

"At last, Harold," I said, as I unfastened the wicket-gate; "I thought you never were coming."

"We were late leaving Rockhead, and I had supper down at Winter's," he replied, with a hurried, absent manner; and then said, almost roughly, "Why did you wait, Laurence? it wasn't worth while."

"It was such a fine night, I didn't care to go to bed," I said. "And the horse, will it do?"

"No, not a bit. It's a roarer, and has a big leg into the bargain. It wasn't worth looking at, though we waited about all day to see it."

He pushed past me into the house, saying good night, without looking back, and I thought to myself poor Harold was tired and vexed at his useless expedition, and pitied him for standing about all day in the hot, dusty town, while I had been enjoying the fields and hill-side. The next morning, however, we did not hear much more of Harold's doings in Rockhead. He was unusually silent and pre-occupied, and went out early, saying he must go to Ruccambe and find out if there was a horse likely to suit Mr. Leigh there.

I went out to the field on the other side of the valley where the first hay was just being cut; for the weather was so fine we were busy cutting and carrying almost at the same time. I dined at the barn, and did not leave the hay-field till towards evening. I was tired with the long day's work, and sauntered leisurely up the valley, watching the sun slowly sinking in a sky of pale emerald behind Durstone cliffs. All round came the scent of the newly-mown hay, and my eyes rested with satisfaction on the rich verdure of the meadows, and on the smoke of the mill cottage, which wound blue

and curling against the dark green of the woods, and thought as I looked I would tempt Harold down there to-night.

I had reached the corner of the lane where the lilacs are, when I caught sight of a branch of deep-pink wild roses in the hedge ; and climbing up the bank I stretched out my arm to reach them, thinking they would please Fortune, and perhaps she would wreath them in her hair, as she had done the forget-me-nots we picked her out of the trout stream.

The sight of the pretty blossoms reminded me of those lines of Hood :

" It was not in the winter
Our loving lot was cast,
It was the time of roses—
I pluck'd them as we passed."

and I was repeating them to myself, when I heard Harold's voice behind me calling, " Laurie, Laurie, stop, old boy."

He was running up the hill after me, and his great strides soon brought him to my side.

" Well, King," unconsciously using the old childish name, I said, " back already ?"

The laugh which rang in my ears had all the old joyousness of his boyhood, the laugh which no one but Harold could laugh ; it did me good to hear it again, as he said—

"O Laurie, forgive me, I know I was a brute last night and this morning, but I was half crazy with fright and worry ; but it's all right now. Wish me joy, Laurie, wish me joy, I'm the luckiest fellow under the sun, Fortune has just promised to be my wife !"





CHAPTER IX.

“And were it wisely done
If we, who cannot gaze above, should walk the earth alone,
If we, whose virtue is so weak, should have a will so strong,
And stand blind on the rocks to choose the right path from the
wrong;
To choose, perhaps, a lovelit hearth, instead of love and heaven—
A single rose, for a rose-tree which beareth seven times seven :
A rose that droppeth from the hand, that fadeth in the breast,
Until, in grieving for the worst, we learn what is the best.”



HAVE lived long and known sorrows worse than those of my youth, but to this day I remember the sharp, sudden pang which shot through me as Harold's quick, happy words passed his lips that evening when we stood under the lilacs at the corner of the lane.

Dear old King ! I was never so thankful for his dulness as at that moment. Utterly unconscious of the shock his news was to me, he ran on telling me the story of his hopes and fears, and how it had all come about.

“You are surprised, old boy, and no wonder. I

never breathed a word about it to any one. Indeed, it was only last month, since she has been at home again, I began to find out I cared for her, and then I thought she'd never have a dull, stupid block-head like me. And it was that which made me so wretched, disgusted-like with myself and every one, until last night I found her in the mill garden, and then my mind was made up, only I dare not tell you, Laurie, because I felt so sure she wouldn't have me."

"Last night?" I said vaguely, still confused and dizzy with the suddenness of Harold's news.

"Yes, when I came up from Winter's she was standing at the door, and I couldn't tear myself away; and then this morning I went straight away to the miller and told him I wanted her for my wife; and he said he'd nothing against it, but Fortune must speak for herself. And then, Laurie, then she came up and put her hands in mine and told me how she had thought of me ever since the day last autumn when I'd just come home and we went down together to the mill."

He stopped, breathless with talking and excitement, and I walked on by his side, still feeling as if the ground was giving way under my feet, and nothing certain was left to trust in.

This, then, was the woman's faith I had believed in, the heart I had hoped to win by my loyal,

patient worship. Now I understood why her behaviour had seemed so strange to me last night, and who it was she expected when I found her singing the sad song on the bridge. "Since last month!" Poor Harold, in his open-heartedness, little knew the bitter mockery his words had for me—I who had loved Fortune for years.

He seemed a little disappointed though at my silence and coldness, and said presently, "Why, Laurie, I thought you'd be glad, and you've never even wished me good luck yet."

This appeal roused me from my stupor. With a firm resolve that no action of mine should mar his new-found joy, I turned to him and said, with a long clasp of his hand in mine—

"God bless you, dear old Harold, I wish you joy with all my heart, and may she prove as good a wife to you as you will be a husband to her." My effort was well rewarded in the sunny smile that came back on Harold's face.

"You know," he said, in his brotherly, confidential way, "it will never make any difference between you and me; I mean to say, all I have is yours, and always shall be, and I'm not afraid but Fortune will make you a good sister. It's better, too, isn't it, than if I'd brought a stranger to live in the old place?"

Father took the news coolly and contentedly,

but without showing much surprise. He was fond of Fortune, and would be glad to have her for his daughter, and was, besides, not blind to the fact that she was the only child of the prosperous miller.

"I used to think," he did say once, but that was not in Harold's hearing, "that Laurie was a bit sweet on her, but it's right and proper that the first-born should marry soonest, and it's better than if he'd taken a town lass with new-fangled ways."

And Judith looked at me in her shrewd way as she said—

"It's a' as it should be, laddie, she's a fitter wife for him nor for thee. I knows nothing agin her, but she's nair the wife for thee, lad."

I laughed at both of them, but said nothing. I had kept my dreams to myself, and no one should know the cruel disappointment which had scattered them to the winds.

But I thought the more in my own heart.

Certainly it was a strange thing that my youthful love should end thus. I had often prepared myself to find I had a rival in Fortune's affections; but that Harold should be this rival, that the hand which I held dearest should strike the blow which dashed my fondest hopes to the ground, this indeed I had never dreamt of.

And yet, after all, it was natural that Fortune should prefer Harold to me—Harold, whom every one liked, handsome, open-hearted Harold, who was the tallest man and finest rider in the whole valley.

Could I quarrel with her for that? Only the thought would come in spite of all my efforts to drive it away, if she never cared for me, why had she looked and spoken like that? why had she let me think that I was at least not indifferent to her?

Either she had never meant things truly, or else she had changed, and in either case she had fallen from the pattern of perfect womanhood that I had dreamt her to be.

Oh, if we knew how deeply our actions affect those who love us, how closely our lives are bound up with those of others, surely we should be more careful how we act and speak and think.

We can set up the idol that has fallen from its high place, we can pick up the broken pieces and try to join them together again, but will life ever be as bright and glad as it was before? shall we ever look as high again?

Poor Fortune, perhaps in the bitterness of my first disappointment I judged her harshly, but I could not bear to think that Harold should have a wife less worthy than himself, and I felt as if a wrong had been done to both of us.

The next day was Sunday. I walked up as usual to church with father and Harold, and saw Fortune come in with downcast eyes and timid step, blushing like a rose; but I could not make up my mind to face the merry party of friends that met in the church porch afterwards, so I slipped out before the last hymn, and under pretence of going to look after a sick sheep, snatched a morsel of dinner at Fairlie and went out for the afternoon. Over the open moor I wandered, where the sheep were feeding on the close-cropped turf, in the shelter of high gorse bushes. The sick lamb was on its feet again with the rest of the flock, and needed my care no longer. But I had not heart to turn back and join the happy ones at home, and instead I went on to the edge of Durstone Rocks, and along the narrow ledge half way down the cliff which leads to the caves.

It was a windy day, the sea was rough and stormy, and the scud chased rapidly past across the sky of breezy blue as I climbed along the difficult path, listening with a kind of savage content to the waves breaking hoarsely at the foot of the cliffs. To me they sounded like an echo of the unutterable dreariness, the bitter cry against the hollowness and vanity of life, that my heart was sending up to God.

I had reached the spot known as Durstone Caves,

now an open space at the foot of the cliffs, where the rocks closing in all round rise to a great height and shut out everything but sea and sky, a spot to which there is no access but along the narrow ledge which at high tide is covered by the waves.

I liked the wild grandeur of the place, and had often stood there watching the waves beat on the rocky strand and the sea-gulls circling overhead, but to-day I only sought the spot because I knew that there at least I should be alone and no human being was likely to disturb my solitude.

There, alone on the rocks, I reflected on the cruel injustice of my fate, and tried to still my tumultuous thoughts to calm.

This, then, was the end of my young dreams, this was the reward I found for trying to lead a useful life, to think and work not for my own good alone but for that of others. Why had I been allowed to care for Fortune if she was to repay me thus? why had not things been ordered differently, and this pain and grief spared me? I reasoned to myself, in my impatient folly, crying out as if no one else had suffered or been wronged before me, and disappointment were a new thing in this world of ours.

As I turned over these bitter thoughts in my mind my eye rested on the far-reaching expanse of waters, and I began unconsciously trying to count the waves as they came rushing in and tumbling

one upon another in floods of snow-white foam. But I soon found this an impossible task, for ever and ever came an eddy off the rocks meeting the incoming waves, driving them backwards and then rolling them up again in wild confusion. And as I looked, the sight of that trackless waste of waters, ever changing, ever moving, never still for one moment, brought back to my mind the words of the psalm I had heard in church that morning—
“Thy way is in the sea, and Thy path in the deep waters, and Thy footsteps are not known.” Again and again the words forced themselves back upon my thoughts, till I began to find in them a meaning I had never seen before.

They seemed to tell me of a God whose greatness and power are marvellous, whose ways are not our ways, and whose thoughts and dealings are not bounded by human limits, a God who sees beyond the narrow horizon of man's vision, and leads His servants by paths they would not have chosen, and ways far above their understanding. And here had I been reasoning with God as if He were a weak, erring creature like myself, and not the God by whose power we live and move, forgetful that failure and suffering meet all here who would live for something beyond the low aims of earth and self, and that it is through great tribulation that we must each of us pass to see His face.

All this came upon me with a new force, a clearness of vision I had never felt before as I lay on the Durstone Rocks that Sunday afternoon. And I looked up and saw the blue sky above, with fleecy clouds swept along by the breeze, and thought of that love bending over all of us, the love which gives men power to do and suffer, to endure as seeing One who is invisible, and felt a new comfort and courage in my soul.

I had been cowardly in running away from the sight of a happiness that was not given to me, but I would do so no more. I would go back and meet Fortune gladly, and welcome her as my sister; it should never be said of me that I had thrown a shadow over Harold's joy, or embittered his gladness; and the rest I would leave in God's hands, and trust to Him to show me work and means by which I might serve Him.

Then I began to think of going home, and for the first time I noticed that the waves were washing close up under my feet, and that all the while I had been dreaming here the tide had been coming in fast.

It suddenly struck me that the path by which I had climbed up the narrow ledge along the cliff-side would be under water; and if so, how could I get home? I went to the edge of the cave carefully, and saw that my fears were too true. No trace of

the path was to be seen, only the waves dashing up against the perpendicular wall of rock.

I looked all round, but, as I well knew, there was no other way by which the caves were accessible. I was no swimmer ; my lameness had stood in the way of that. I could no more climb the sides of the rocks, which rose in a massive wall straight above my head, than fly. And high overhead, several yards beyond where my hand could reach, I could see the water-mark, showing where the tide had washed the cliffs.

It was strange I should have forgotten this, for the perils of Durstone Caves were well known in the valley, and stories of children tide-bound there, who had only been rescued by ropes thrown over the cliffs, were among the terrors of our childhood.

And now I was here without a creature to lend help, with the waves rushing in faster and faster, it seemed, every moment that I waited.

What was to be done? From the caves no signals of distress that I could make would be seen, excepting out at sea, and the few boats that were out to-day were much too far off to come to my relief.

I did flutter the big red handkerchief in which Judith had wrapped a crust of bread and meat for me, as high up as I could hold it, standing on the broken rocks at the foot of the cave, but the distant boats moved on in the opposite direction, making

for the Welsh coast, and no hope of deliverance came to me.

Then I shouted, in hopes some shepherd on the top of the cliffs might hear me ; but it was a savage, unfrequented spot, and no answer came, although I cried with all my might again and again, at intervals for the next half hour. It was all no use, the sea was coming in fast. The roar in my ears, the splash of the breakers at my feet, grew louder and more deafening every minute, and I felt that those furious waves must soon swallow me up in their whirling abyss.

There was no help for it, I must die. It sounded strange, fearful !

To die—die out here all alone, away from all I loved best, go thus suddenly at a moment's notice, without farewell or parting words ; here, too, only a mile or two from home, within easy reach of friends and dear ones, who would have risked their lives to bring me help.

Poor Harold ! How little he thought of this ; how little he could have dreamt as he sat at tea, perhaps, with Fortune at the mill, that the joy of his wedding would be darkened by the loss of his only brother !

How strangely altered the aspect of things was to me now ! Life, seen across the rush of those angry waves that were so soon to bear me to the shore

from which there is no returning, seemed still pleasant, worthy of desire. The thought of home, of father and Judith, the quiet Sunday walk to the old church on the hill, the happy days of work in hay-field or orchard, all the thousand simple pleasures, the delights and tendernesses of life, came back to me with a sweetness that I had never known till then.

How slight, how comparatively trivial, did even the wrong Fortune had done me seem now! How quickly did things regain their true proportion when seen in the light of the other world that was now so near! O God, how bitterly I repented of my blind rage and murmurings against the injustice of Providence.

But it was too late—too late now to look back and regret the past; death was close upon me now, already the waves were rolling up round me, up to the highest rocks on which I stood, washing my feet, and leaving great masses of sea-weed on the cliffs.

Once more I shouted with a despairing energy, and then waited and listened. But no answering sound came; there were no sails out at sea now, and I put away the thought of rescue, and turned my thoughts to that God with whom I should soon be, and who was all that I had now left to trust in.

Then, just when I had given up all hope, a loud, ringing shout, as of men close at hand, broke on my ear with startling force. It came not from the top of the cliffs, but from the entrance of the cave, and yet, far as I looked I could see nothing—nothing but the windy sky, and the waves rushing in with ever-increasing violence.

I shouted too, and in the cries that came back I could clearly distinguish the words, "Hold hard, we'll be round soon. Look a-hoy!"

Some one had heard my cry of distress, and was coming round the corner in a boat, turning the jagged rocks that closed in the cave on the opposite side.

It was a perilous venture, I knew, and held my breath while I waited and listened to the voices that now reached me distinctly.

Another moment and I could see three men rowing with might and main to pull a boat round the corner. I cried to them to beware of the rocks, and to steady their craft against the side of the cliffs. Then I took a desperate leap, and felt myself being dragged into the boat by a fisher-boy in a red cap and blouse.

"Steady, lads, steady; look to the front," said the grey-headed fisherman at the bow. A few strokes of the oar, a moment's skilful steering, and we had cleared the mouth of the caves, and I knew that I was saved.

Oh, how good the sound of human voices seemed again! How blessed the sunshine lighting up the green valley slopes, and the quiet homesteads in their Sabbath peacefulness; how fresh and joyous the breeze that met us as we tossed on the open sea of Wenlock Bay, and made for the fishing village at its far end! My deliverers were fishermen from near Linton, who had come further out than was their wont, and were coasting along the rocks, intending to harbour that night at Wenlock. They had heard my cry as they rowed along the rocks, only a few hundred yards off, and lost no time in making for the caves.

"We fellers were a wishing we hadn't put out so far," said the elder of the three, as he explained the circumstances which had brought them within reach, "but now we doesn't;" and as we parted at Wenlock-town, and I asked the landlord of the little inn to make them comfortable at my expense, we shook hands heartily, and they called after me to mind and keep clear of Durstone Caves, for they might not be at hand another time.

Just out of the village I met Harold, who had come to see where I could be stopping so long, and had searched all over the hill-side in vain for me. When he had heard how I had been overtaken by the high tide at Durstone Caves, and only rescued by Linton fishermen, he shuddered at the thought of what a narrow escape I had had.

"O Laurie, old boy, to think that I might never have seen you more. What would father have thought, and Judith, and Fortune, too, for she was always fond of you, and now she is one of us?"

I only grasped his hand in answer, and we agreed not to tell father all the danger I had been in, as it would only distress him needlessly. But the next morning I went straight down to the mill, and found Fortune trying on the pretty gold ring which Harold had given her.

She blushed and dropped her eyes as I entered, and walking straight up to her I said, "Fortune, I thank you for making Harold so happy, and I am sure you will be a good wife to him and a kind sister to me."

She did not even look up, but squeezed my hand tight, and there was a quiver on her lip as she said, "Thank you, Laurie, it is very, *very* good of you to talk like that. And I will try to be a good wife to Harold, for I love him very dearly."

After that I felt it easier to forgive her; and Mrs. Mavor came in, and insisted on giving me a motherly kiss. "For you know, Laurie, if you're not my son, you're Harold's brother, and though I am very glad to have him for my son-in-law, I had always thought it would be you, not him."



CHAPTER X.

'The wide earth is still
Wider than one man's passion: there's no mood,
No meditation, no delight, no sorrow,
Cas'd in one man's dimensions, can distil
Such pregnant and infectious quality,
Six yards round shall not ring it."

"**T**O bear is to conquer our fate." I had read the sentence once in a book I borrowed from the Hall library, and often in that summer-time the words came back to my mind.

For though I had resolved that memorable afternoon when I lay in the Durstone Caves that I would never by word or sign let any see that I had ever thought of Fortune as anything else than the girl Harold loved, and though I never faltered in that resolution, there were moments when my heart was heavy, and I was almost tempted to wish the honest fishermen had not saved me from the waves.

Harold's new tie had made a change in my home life. While he was taken up with Fortune and preparations for his coming marriage, I went about my

work with a feeling of loneliness, and felt that my life had become in a measure aimless.

Once Harold was married and settled at home, I should no longer be needed, and yet there seemed nothing I could turn to now, or else I wanted the spirit to seek out some new work for myself.

But God is good, and help came from a quarter whence I had least expected it.


One Sunday afternoon when I was sitting out in the porch with father—it was July, and the passion-flower spread its blossoms over the trellis, and the purple clematis mingled with the myrtle and fuchsia that hung over the porch—Sir Edmond, for so we had learnt to call him, came walking up the lane.

He had been abroad most of the year, and had only returned to Silscote a few weeks ago with Lady Wyncourt and the family, for he had married some years before Sir Guy's death.

Father stood up and lifted his hat from his grey head, but Sir Edmond desired him to sit down, and, turning to me, said—

“Laurence,” he always called me by my Christian name still, “I want to know if you could spare a week or two from home to go to town and do a job for me? I thought now your brother was back you might be able to get the time.”

I saw my father brighten up at the idea of my



going on an errand for Sir Edmond, and said I thought I could, while father added—

“Of course the lad could go wherever it pleased his worship to send him.”

“That is right,” said Sir Edmond. He was always a man of few words, grave and quiet, not like Sir Guy in his open, kindly manner, and people often called him proud, but I know—and it is not from hearsay that I speak—that never was there a kindlier soul than his, or one that had the welfare of all around him more truly at heart. “Come up to the Hall at ten to-morrow, and we will talk over things.”

The next morning I was at the Hall punctually to the hour, and was shown to the library where I had often seen Sir Guy and his son before. Presently Sir Edmond came in and sat down at a table with a handful of papers before him.

“Look here, Laurence,” he said, “this is what I want you to do. You know we have a great deal of work with timber here, more, I find, than my men can possibly manage, so I am thinking of setting up a steam saw-mill. But before I do this I want some one I can trust to go to London and bring me back accurate descriptions of the machinery employed. I cannot spare time myself, nor can I let Mayne, for there is a great deal to be seen to here; but you used to have a good head, and if I

remember right, a turn for this sort of thing. Now will you undertake it?"

I said that I thought I could, and Sir Edmond went on to give me full instructions and directions how to proceed.

I was to go up to town the very next day, to Sir Edmond's then untenanted house in Grosvenor Place, and take my observations at a large firm in Blackfriars.

It would take some time, for I was to visit several other large houses, and bring back plans and full and particular information respecting the make and working of saw-mills and other steam machinery. Sir Edmond especially desired me not to hurry, but to see London while I was about it, and dismissed me to make preparations for my journey, promising to furnish me before I started with letters of introduction to the firms I was to visit.

Great was the wonder at Fairlie when I disclosed the purport of my interview with Sir Edmond. Father's delight knew no bounds; in his eyes it was a much finer thing to be sent to town on business by Sir Edmond than even to be going to be married.

As for Judith, she expressed herself "consternated" at the thought of one of her boys going to Lunnon; and was divided between admiration at the greatness of the thing and commiseration for me

in going to be shut up in "them streets, with nothing but bricks and mortar to look on, and not a ha'p'orth of fresh air from one week's end to another."

Early on Tuesday morning I received Sir Edmond's last instructions, with a parting injunction to mind and not hurry back, and drove down with Harold to start by the coach for Taunton.

Judith's fixed conviction was that I should die of hunger on the road; and so bountifully had she provided against this, that I found myself unable to take one-half of the parcels of sandwiches and cold pie and cake and apples that she had prepared for my consumption in the train, and disappointed her grievously by rejecting a bottle of best home-brewed cider, which she produced at the last moment, with the thoughtful addition of a corkscrew to draw the cork.

I had been by coach to Taunton before, but the rest of the journey was an entire novelty to me, and I shall never forget the amazed expression of a fellow-passenger, who got in at Swindon and sat opposite to me all the way to London, when I mentioned casually that this was the first time I had ever been in the train. He was a traveller for some Manchester warehouse, and spent his days on the railway—a life which would not have been at all to my taste, but he seemed to flourish remarkably

on it, and made himself comfortable in the train with his despatch-box on the seat in front of him, and half a dozen newspapers and yellow-backed paper-books, as if he had been a gentleman in his study at home, although, as he did observe, "It is hot weather for travelling this, sir." Most good-natured he was too, showing me the towers of Windsor Castle, where the Queen lives, though, as he remarked, the flag was down now, as Her Majesty was away in Scotland, and telling me the river we crossed on a long bridge was the Thames.

I had expected a muddy, sluggish stream, and looked in surprise at the broad, blue river, with banks of woods, green and beautiful, like our own valley trees, rising from the water edge, and throwing cool shadows across its shining surface.

"Not a bad pastime for a day like this, eh, sir?" said my companion, seeing me cast a curious look at a man who was lying back in a boat moored to the bank in the shade of some leafy horse chestnuts; and I began to think that, if I did not live on the sea, I should like to have my home on a river like that.

Soon after that my companion remarked that we were nearing town now, and as the green fields receded and the railway became enclosed between rows of high-storied, dingy-looking houses, I began to feel a new excitement in the sense that this was London.

Then the train stopped : my companion called to a porter to help him with his hat-boxes and numerous packages, and I was conscious of nothing but a confused hubbub and bustle of porters and people screaming for their luggage, and cabs and carriages driving off, from all of which I was very glad to escape, and find myself seated in a cab on the way to Grosvenor Place.

The first impression London gave me was that of not being half so fine as I had expected. I suppose it was that I unconsciously retained a good deal of the childish dreams and country people's imagination of London as paved with gold and resplendent with marble palaces ; but when I had seen something more of it, when I had stood on the steps of the National Gallery looking over Trafalgar Square, and on Kensington Bridge, and seen the Houses of Parliament and the old Abbey walls, on the river-side, flushed too, as I saw the Victoria Tower one evening, from head to foot in the faint rose tints of a glowing sunset, then I began to see how much there is that is beautiful even in town.

What struck me more than anything though, were the streets and the immense crowds of people always moving there, whether on foot or in carriages, and the great omnibuses that seem to follow each other in such perpetual string. I had never felt that the world was so big before ; it was quite bewildering

to think that each person in all these countless masses of people had his own individual interests, his own tale of joys and sorrows all unknown to others, and my own life, my all-absorbing history, even that of the whole population of the valley, seemed to shrink into insignificance by the side of this mighty concourse of human beings all crowded together in these streets.

It gave me a certain sense of loneliness no doubt to move among those hurrying throngs, and feel that all the faces that met one had neither thought nor care for me or my business ; but it taught me, too, how to value the love and true-hearted care still living for me at home, and sent me back a wiser and a stronger man.

It would be impossible to recount here one half of the sights I saw, the things I learnt in the space of that fortnight I was in London. For I made good use of my time, and as my work could only be done in the mornings, I had the afternoons to myself, and obeyed Sir Edmond's orders to see everything that was worth seeing.

Every morning I used to be at Westminster Bridge by nine, and start by penny boat for Blackfriars, where Runcorn's works, which I was to visit, were. Once, too, I went all down the river beyond Blackfriars, past St. Paul's Cathedral, with the big dome just like one sees it on the *Illustrated News*,

and the great square mass of the Tower and the Custom House, and then by the docks and shipping, and all round Greenwich with its hospital domes, the way to Erith, where some of the larger iron-works are.

The first day I felt a little nervous in presenting myself at Runcorn's, a great firm where hundreds of hands were employed, and people perpetually going in and out ; but directly I produced Sir Edmond's letter every one was civil, and I was taken round by one of the clerks, a most good-natured and friendly sort of young man, who took me under his protection, and was amazingly pleasant spoken.

I was allowed to see and take plans and jot down notes of all I wanted, and a wonderful sight it was—the whole of that machinery set into motion, the saws working up and down, cutting through huge trunks and blocks of wood without any labour being required, excepting the superintendence of one man at the engine, and an occasional shifting of the wood into place as one plank after the other was sliced off, and done as neatly and cleanly as if you had handled the saw and polished off the corners yourself.*

Still more wonderful I thought some of the other machines were, which lifted great bars of iron that no man, were he ever so strong, could have held for a

moment, lifted them up and tossed them about, and bent and shaped them as if they were bits of straw.

The more I studied the machinery, the more I found how perfect and complete each part of the work was, and how beautifully it was designed and nothing forgotten or left undone, the more I was filled with wonder and awe for the mind of man to whom it is given to invent and fashion such great things, and yet more for that glorious God from whom all the knowledge and the power comes.

It taught me, too, when I watched it all work, and saw how one part depended upon the other, and how, if the smallest thing went wrong, the whole worked badly, how we each of us depend one upon another in life ; and how, if we fail in our duty, others are sure to suffer in consequence. And a great deal more I learnt which I cannot say here, but which I have never forgotten all through my life.

Then in the afternoons I went to see the Tower and St. Paul's, where Lord Nelson and the great Duke of Wellington, who died not so long ago, were buried, and stood under the big dome, and up in the cage at the top.

The Mint, too, I saw, where the coin of the realm is made. It is not every one that is admitted there, but my friend, the clerk at Runcorn's, had a friend

who was employed in the stamping room, and so we were given an order, and went all through the rooms. The furnaces, where the workmen, with blackened faces and red-hot tools, reminded me of the old Greek story of Vulcan's Forge, and the liquid gold that stood in the moulds and blue flame of the silver was beautiful to look at ; and then we saw those rooms where the cutting and rolling and stamping and weighing go on, all in turn, till bright sovereigns and shillings and halfpence, all ready made, come tumbling out in shoals.

I went to the Park, too, and looked at the gentlemen and ladies riding in Rotten Row, and saw the carriages go driving up and down. What crowds of them there were, although people said it was nothing to what it had been, and the season was almost over.

I thought how the fine coaches and liveried servants standing up behind in scarlet, gold, and silver, and still more, the horses stepping out so smartly, would have delighted Harold. But what surprised me was, that instead of driving all round the park, which is large and has a drive all round it, the people would keep going up and down the same piece, although the crowd was so great that the carriages often had to stand still for ten minutes together, and policemen on horseback moved through the crowd to keep order among the coachmen.

Jonas Claxton, my friend at Runcorn's, laughed when I asked him why this was, and the only explanation I could get out of him was "that it was the fashion," which seemed to me rather an unreasonable thing.

I saw the Zoological Gardens, and the British Museum, too, and felt I could have spent weeks and months there among the marbles and skeletons of animals and all the wonderful collections there ; and I saw Buckingham Palace, a big house behind high railings, where the Queen lives. Sir Edmond's house looked out on the palace gardens, and in the early morning the birds used to sing in the branches in a way which would have surprised Judith indeed. But the Queen I did not see, as she was away in Scotland, and that was the only disappointment of my visit to London.

Claxton laughed at me when I told him this, and assured me there was nothing wonderful to see in her, for she did not wear her robes and crown, at least not in the day-time—of that he was quite sure—and looked just like any other lady. But yet I felt that I should have gone home better satisfied, and that it would have been a thing to remember to my dying day, if I could have looked once on the face of our good, gracious Queen.

I did see her crown though at the Tower, and the golden throne on which she sits when she comes to

open Parliament in the House of Lords. The pictures I saw too in the National Gallery, and among them many lovely faces and forms to remember all my life; and one thing I will not forget, for I liked it best of all. I went to Westminster Abbey and saw Poets' Corner, and the chapels and tombs of the kings, and heard some beautiful singing from the white-robed choristers.

The Abbey was almost empty, and I leant against one of the old pillars, and heard the organ strains rolling up the arches in great waves of melody, and listened to the sweet voices.

And as I listened, I shut my eyes and forgot the Abbey and the noise and din of men without, and the long murmur of the waves dying on the beach came into my ear, and I thought of the sun setting behind Durstone Rocks, in Wenlock Bay, and of my dead mother sleeping in the quiet churchyard among the hills, with the daisies growing in the long grass over her grave.





CHAPTER XI.

"'Twill all be well : no need of care ;
Though how it will, and when and where,
We cannot see and can't declare,
In spite of dreams, in spite of thought,
'Tis not in vain, and not for nought,
The wind it blows, the ship it goes,
Though where and whither, no one knows."



THE last Saturday I was in London I went down with my friend Jonas Claxton to the Crystal Palace at Sydenham. He was free that afternoon early, and was determined to show me this finest of all sights, he assured me, declaring that it was impossible that I should leave town without having been there.

To say the truth, I was getting a little tired of sight-seeing ; but Claxton made it so much a personal favour to himself, that I could not refuse. I really liked the fellow, he was so friendly, and had talked to me freely of his widowed mother who lived down in Erith, and whom he kept by his earnings, which had won my heart at once.

So we went down in the afternoon, and I must confess that, after all I had seen, the Palace at Sydenham was more wonderful and beautiful than anything.

The sun shone through the glittering domes of glass, and as I looked down the long nave with tall palms, hanging plants, and tropical creepers, basins of lilies, and fountains playing, I felt as if I were moving in some enchanting region. It was like travelling all over the world to pass through the foreign courts, and see Italian, Egyptian, and Moorish temples. The Alhambra to me was the most beautiful, with stained glass and Mosaic pavements, and water flowing over beds of exotic ferns. Then the gardens delighted me, terraces, noble elm trees, grassy slopes, with roses of every colour and variety in the richest profusion, all brought together in front of that shining palace; and I could think of no better refreshment for tired Londoners than to sit on those banks, feeling the delicious breeze, and letting the eye wander over far-away hills and soft blue distance like my own Somersetshire home.

Claxton expressed himself highly satisfied with my enjoyment of everything that I saw, and we waited to see the fountains play. All at once the waters shot up in a spiral column, to fall in clouds of dust-like spray all around, and then the fireworks

broke over them, innumerable rockets, and gold clouds and stars lighting up the sky and falling in showers of gorgeous jewels, ruby and emerald and sapphire, while the bands played merrily and the fountains ran golden waters. That was the last of my London sights. On Monday I went down to Blackfriars once more, and again on Tuesday, to take a final order of Sir Edmond's to Runcorn's.

I had finished my business, and was about to leave, when, to my surprise, Jonas Claxton came up in a great state of bustle, and informed me, with an air of importance, that Mr. Raeburn, the managing partner of the firm, requested the favour of a few minutes' interview with me.

With some surprise I followed him through a plate-glass door, that led into a comfortable room, where two gentlemen sat. The one, an elderly-looking man, who was busy ranging papers at a desk, I had never seen before, but the younger of the two I had often met in the shop where Jonas had pointed him out to me as Mr. Frank Raeburn, the only son of the senior partner. We had already had a good deal of conversation together, for he seemed anxious to pick up information about country business, probably because, as Jonas informed me, he had lately bought an estate in Surrey. He now greeted me with a cordial

"Good morning," and asking me to be seated, proceeded :—

"I sent for you, Mr. Isham, because I could not let you leave us without asking you this. The truth is, I want an agent to help me in the management of my Surrey property. You understand these things, and I have no doubt we should get on very well if we could come to some agreement as to terms." And he named a handsome sum as the salary he was prepared to give.

The suddenness of the offer took me by surprise. For a moment I felt abashed and flattered, but after a few minutes' reflection replied that, grateful as I was for the offer, and highly as I felt the honour done me, I feared I must decline this flattering proposal, as I had no intention to leave my home at present. As I said this Mr. Frank looked at his uncle, and presently continued—

"Of course you know your own mind best, Mr. Isham. At the same time, I should be sorry to lose your services if it were a matter of pecuniary consideration—say a question of twenty or thirty pounds or so more."

In return, I hastened to assure him that the salary he had already named more than equalled my deserts or expectations ; but that since he was good enough to think I could be of service to

him, I should be glad to consider his offer and let him have my answer in a few days.

Upon this the two gentlemen looked at each other with so evident a smile that I began to fear I had said something wrong, when Mr. Raeburn relieved me by saying civilly—

“Pray take your time, and I shall hope you will be able to return my nephew a favourable answer.”

Mr. Frank concluded by asking me to take luncheon with him and his uncle, a civility I was, however, obliged to decline, as I intended going straight to Paddington and catching the express to the west that afternoon.

So I left Runcorn's after a hurried farewell from my friend Jonas, and in another hour or two was being whirled away in the express, and had left London and all its busy life and crowded streets far behind me.

It was with a strange feeling of relief, a delicious sense of repose and freedom, that I got down from the coach at Rockhead late that evening, thankful to be out of the heat and noise of London, away from the dusty train, the screaming of railway whistles, and the shouting of porters. How sweet the stillness and shade seemed, how fragrant and balmy the country air, laden with the breath of lime-blossom and the scent of honeysuckle and roses. The running sound of the brook, the song

of a late bird from the acacia branches, the long ripple of the waves on the beach, fell on my ear with a new music. I was going down into the valley, and looking out for the Hall chimney-tops, when I heard voices along the lane, and the next moment found Harold and Fortune, who had wandered out this way in hopes of finding I had returned by the coach. It was a happy meeting, and we all three walked up home together. Judith stood at the gate in stiff-starched cap and apron, ready waiting to receive me, and clapped her eyes upon me, as she called it, looking me up and down as she repeated—

“Why, the lad looks nohow different, but just as bonny as when he wented.” Evidently she had expected London to work some surprising change in me.

Father was chiefly anxious to hear how I had done Sir Edmond's business, and what sort of houses London streets were made of; while Fortune's curiosity was all directed to hearing of the fine gowns the great ladies wore, and if it were true hoops were coming in again, and I soon found my information in these respects was far too scant to satisfy her.

But every one was full of warm kindness that evening. Indeed, they made as much fuss about me as if I had been away in London at least a year, instead of a fortnight.

That evening, when the rest were gone to bed, and Harold and I sat alone in the porch, where I was feeling as if I could never drink in enough of the cool night air, I told him of the offer which had been made me to become Mr. Frank Raeburn's agent.

He listened gravely, and when I had ended, said—

"Then you would leave home, Laurie, and give up the farm to me?"

"Well, you see, Harold, once you are married and settled here I may as well look out for some other work; you will easily manage for yourself, as I have done these years you have been away."

"Do you think so, Laurie?" he said, a little sorrowfully. "I am sure Fortune and I would find it very hard to get on without you. Couldn't you at least stop here, and get some more land from Sir Edmond? Or else I'd give up the farm to you, and live on our own bit, and help the miller."

Of course this was not to be thought of, and Harold said nothing more, till as the clock on Silscote church struck twelve, and we went up the staircase softly, not to disturb father, he put his hand on my shoulder, and said with a voice that was low and husky,

"Don't, Laurie boy, don't."

After that I felt as if Mr. Raeburn's offer had but

little chance of a favourable answer, even though it did almost seem as if it were a plain duty to avail myself of such an opportunity of usefulness. "

The events of the next day, however, saved me the trouble of further reflection. I went up to the Hall the first thing in the morning to deliver my papers to Sir Edmond, and lay the results of my observations before him.

He expressed himself highly satisfied with the manner in which I had discharged my commission, and at the close of our interview I ventured to tell him of Mr. Raeburn's offer.

A change of expression passed over Sir Edmond's features as I spoke.

"So they want to inveigle my own man away from me, do they? That's it, is it? though they took good care to keep their counsel in that matter."

I could not quite understand what Sir Edmond meant by this, and he, seeing my puzzled look, said with a smile—

"Well, I'm glad you told me, for I have something to say to that. Look here, Laurence, you are a young man, not above four or five and twenty, I dare say——"

"Two and twenty, Sir Edmond," I felt it my duty to put in.

"Well, two and twenty; I don't know that a year

or two makes much difference one way or the other, though it is young certainly," and he knitted his eyebrows together as if weighing the matter well. Then he continued: "But though you are young, I know you have a head on your shoulders, I saw that long ago, when you were quite a child, and the way you managed your father's land showed me that I was right. Listen to me now. My steward, Mayne, is leaving me after Christmas for a larger place, and sorry as I am to lose him, I cannot stand in his way of bettering himself. Now will you undertake to fill his place? Of course you can live at home, but I should expect to see you every morning, and as to the rest, you know his duties pretty well. I receive my own rents and choose my own tenants, and all I want in my steward is a man I can thoroughly trust, who will be general overlooker and superintendent of the estate and work that goes on in the valley."

As I paused, too much amazed to find words to answer, Sir Edmond continued—

"Of course you must think over all this for yourself, and see if it would be wise in you to take the place, when so good an offer is made you. All I have to say is, that if you become my steward after Christmas, I will give you the same salary that Mayne has had, two hundred a year, for you are worth that, and of course you could in the

interval before he leaves be picking up a useful hint or two from him."

He ceased, and I could only thank him falteringly for the confidence he placed in me, and say I would gladly take the place and do my utmost to serve him in this capacity.

"We are agreed, then," he said kindly; "I shall be at home mostly, I hope, till February, and we shall have plenty of opportunities for discussion as to further arrangements, so I need keep you no longer now. Here, though, take this, which is due to you." And he put a cheque for ten pounds into my hands, which I thought very liberal wages for the pleasant fortnight I had spent in town.

Great was the wonder, the delight at home when Sir Edmond announced that I was to succeed Mr. Mayne as his steward. For we had all grown up to regard Mr. Mayne as, next to Sir Guy, the greatest man in the valley, and father shed tears of joy to think Sir Edmond should hold me worthy of such a trust.

Of course a refusal had to be written that day to Mr. Raeburn, and Harold's glee knew no bounds. "To think Laurence is going to be steward and manage us all, and we shall all live together, and lead the merriest life of any Britisher in the three kingdoms."

And he ran up and down-stairs in his boyish

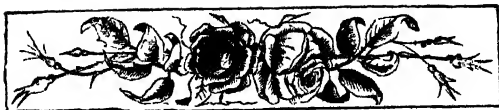
delight, shouting out the good news, and singing at the top of his voice—

“Danderly-dan, Danderly-dan,
He shall marry my lady fair,
He shall marry her, he's the man.”

till Judith said, “Why, bless the boy, one would think Maister Laurence were agoing to be married as well as t' other.”

To which Harold returned that, though he was going to be married, I was far the greater man, for wasn't I going to be Mr. Mayne, the biggest swell in the valley, and, what's more, the only person he had ever been afraid of in his life.





CHAPTER XII.

"Fear not, retire not, O man: hope evermore and believe;
Go from the east to the west, as the sun and the stars direct thee,
Go with the girdle of man, go and encompass the earth.
Not for the gain of the gold: for the getting, the boarding, the
having,
But for the joy of the deed; but for the duty to do—
Go with the spiritual life, the higher volition and action,
With the great girdle of God, go and encompass the earth."

THE year that followed on my return from London was a very eventful one in my life.

It brought many changes, griefs as well as joys, which made the old home a different thing to what it had been, in more ways than one. Harold and Fortune were married before Christmas, about the time that I entered on my new duties, and whatever Fortune was to others, I must say that during all the years we lived together at Fairlie she proved the kindest of sisters to me, and on my own account, I had never any reason to regret the choice Harold had made.

Father, too, was always fond of her, and she had a pretty, kitten-like playfulness, a way of

looking nice, and saying pleasant things that cheered and brightened him.

BUT he had been gradually growing infirm and feeble for some time past, and when the winter cold set in, he had not strength to resist it. A sharp attack of bronchitis carried him off at the end of a few days' illness. As he lay on his sick bed one evening he said to me—

“Laurie, lad, last night I thought I heard the good old master's voice, so I know I be a going soon. You'll lay me with your mother, up on the hill-side. And God'll bless and prosper you lads, both on ye, for it's good sons as ye've been to me. And I'm going now; three score and ten years and upwards is a goodish bit of life for any on us, and I've no desire to stop longer. Yes, yes,” he murmured softly to himself, “I shall soon be with Sir Guy now.”

He passed away quietly before morning, and we none of us felt we could grieve bitterly for him, for his work was done, and he was glad to go to rest.

Only it made a great change in the old home, and Harold and I felt that we must cling the closer to each other, now that he was gone. It brought with it too another change, for which I grieved almost more, because it was one of those things which are not, like death, inevitable, and therefore plainly ordained by God, but seem the result

of human caprice, although God's hand, we know, is working in them too.

From the day that Fortune came to Fairlie as Harold's wife, Judith's position was naturally somewhat altered. This was of course in a great measure not to be prevented, and Judith had in the first instance submitted with a good grace to the changes brought about by the establishment of a new mistress, retreating to the kitchen for her meals, and taking her orders from Fortune equably.

But it soon appeared that there was a decided incompatibility of temper between the two, which showed itself in various ways on repeated occasions.

Judith's passion for cleaning, and for preciseness in everything she did was try ag to Fortune, while Fortune's alterations and improvements in the arrangement of furniture, and all inside the house, were in Judith's eyes only a turning of things upside down, "a setting the house lawless and crazy-like," as she called it.

Certainly when Fortune had brought in all her pretty new things and put them in the parlour, and turned out the unwieldy mahogany table which filled half the room, and replaced the old clock that never would go for more than a day together by an elegant china time-piece with Cupids hovering over it, the room did look very nice, even

though the wax flowers which she placed on the chimney-piece under glass shades were not altogether to my taste.

And yet I could not help thinking she might have consulted Judith a little more, and considered her feelings on the subject, a thing which, to do Fortune justice, I really believe never struck her.

As long as my father lived, and while Fortune was still in the first flush of her married happiness, things went along pretty smoothly however, but about a month after father's death, it became plain the new mistress and old servant would not long pull together.

At last one day when I had been out as usual all day, and it being spring and a busy time with the lambs and with cleaning the ground, Harold had not yet come in, I noticed that there was something wrong.

Fortune's eyes were red with crying, and she scarcely spoke while we sat together in the parlour waiting for Harold ; and when I went into the kitchen to give Judith a message from the butcher at Rockhead, she met me with the stiffest, most rigid of airs, and did not vouchsafe me a single word beyond her, " Very well, maister," uttered in the severest of tones.

All the time she was laying supper too, I noticed what a clatter she made, and how one thing

dropped out of her hands after the other, and the very chairs seem to have been seized with a fit of tumbling about and upsetting, always a sign that Judith's temper was ruffled.

Harold told me afterwards that his wife had had words with Judith over the crimson hangings in Fortune's room, the old best bed-room, which Fortune declared to be faded and worn out, and which Judith insisted on patching up, and would not hear of their removal. But I had not expected what took place on the following morning, when Judith came up to me before I left the house and said—

“Maister Laurence, I ’m going to leave ; I blames nobody, and I says nothing against no one, but I ’m too old to begin at my time o’ life to learn new-fangled ways. I ’ll not say as I ha ’n’t tried, but I thought from the first as how it wouldn’t do, and it won’t—and I ’ve said so to Maister Harold. And, what’s more, I ’ve got another place, and am going to keep house for Farmer Falls at Lynch.”

I confess I opened my eyes and stared at Judith as she uttered this lengthy statement, and it took some time before I could really take in that she had engaged herself to keep house for Farmer Falls, and go to live all that long way off, on the other side of the hills, but she was not to be shaken in her resolution, and the independent way in which she

had acted, showed that her mind was entirely made up.

Harold talked over the matter with me that evening, and I soon saw that though he regretted Judith's step as much as I did, he looked upon her departure as inevitable.

"You know," he said, "women are different to us, and one can't alter them. Fortune will like a younger maid better, though I'm sure she did try to get along with poor old Judith."

So Judith went, maintaining her stern demeanour and unbending rigidity to the last—not quite the last though, for though she took leave of me and listened to my parting hopes that she would be comfortable and that she would come and see us whenever she could, without moving a muscle, I saw her face buried in her handkerchief as she came out of the dairy where the milk-pails stood ranged in a row and cleaned up ready for the new maid, and after she was gone I found the last account of the butter she had sold lying on the parlour-table, all blotted with tears. Poor Judith! I felt her loss acutely; it was the severing of another link that bound us with the old childish days, and my only consolation was that she had a comfortable home and a good master in Farmer Falls of Lynch.

After that Fortune had things her own way at

Fairlie, and liked the new maid, who was a willing girl enough, although her smart cap and the pyramid of flowers on her Sunday bonnet were strangely different to anything to which Judith had accustomed us. And I threw myself into my work with more ardour than ever, and forgot the changes that had come in the fresh occupation and new interests which sprang up every day of my life in my new sphere of labour.

That March Sir Edmond was returned as one of our county members, and so spent the whole of that spring and summer in London. The estate work was therefore left almost entirely to me, and I had enough to do in overlooking the improvements that were being carried out, and spent my days in riding all over the valley and outlying farms.

That year too Runcorn's men came down and put up the steam-saw at Silscote. The ferment excited in the valley at this was great; steam-engines were a novelty in these parts, all the prejudices of the labouring class were aroused by their introduction, and not even loyalty to Sir Edmond could keep men's tongues tied. Sir Edmond himself had expected something of this, and the last words he said to me when he left at Whitsuntide were—

“You will have some disturbance, I dare say, and mind, if you're uneasy, you've only to telegraph for me.”

But I was quite determined *not* to telegraph for Sir Edmond unless driven to the last extremity.

The saw-mill was put up, and it only remained for Runcorn's man to put our labourers in the way of using it before he left. With that intention I had appointed two or three of our best men to meet in the morning at the saw-pits ; but as I knew the erection of the steam-mill was not a popular measure, I had not been surprised at receiving a somewhat sullen assent.

Once the engine is at work, I said to myself, they will understand it, and get over their dislike, and I repeated the same to Harold when he told me the night before that the men were all grumbling over the new machinery, and saying it was a plot of Sir Edmond's to cheat them out of their wages, and let their families starve.

The idea was so ridiculous, I could only smile ; but when the next morning came, I went down to the saw-pits, and found Runcorn's man alone, and no labourers.

I looked round the gardens, the land immediately round the house which Sir Edmond kept in his own hands. Not a man was to be seen, only a boy, the son of one of the lodgekeepers, who worked in the gardens was weeding the gravel walks as usual.

"What's this, Colin?" I said to him, "have all

the men stopped work, or do they think we mean to do without them for the future?"

The boy looked at me aghast for a moment, and then grinned.

"It's them *hinjins*," he said, pointing to the sheds under which the steam mill was erected, with Runcorn's man standing by disconsolately.

"Do you mean it is because they object to the engines, or do they think the work will be harder and the pay less?"

"I dunno, but it's them *hinjins*," was all Colin said, and more than that it was impossible to extract from him.

"Well, this won't do," I said, looking from Colin to Runcorn's man. "It is past eight already; I'll just go round the cottages and see what is happening. Will you kindly step into the house?"—the gardener's where he lodged was close by—"and come back in an hour's time, and I will be here myself by then, and let you know what to expect."

So saying I turned my steps towards the village, hoping to come across some of the refractory men. I had not far to go. A group of ten or twelve men were standing in knots on the village green, evidently consulting together as to their future mode of action.

I went up straight to these, and as I drew near, I noticed several slink off towards their own houses,

and more than one looked decidedly sheepish and uncomfortable as I began—

“Look here, you fellows, I don’t understand what this means. Are you coming to work this morning? or if not, what reasons am I to give Sir Edmond for your stopping away?”

There was a little muttering in the group, and one of them, Tom Carvil, a first-rate sawyer, and, moreover, a man who knew how to talk too, said—

“There’s none of us coming. If Sir Edmond thinks we’re going to allow engines to be put up, and ourselves thrown out of work, we’ll just show him he’s wrong.”

He paused, and a faint murmur of approval seemed to indicate that he had expressed the sentiments of his fellow-workmen.

But I soon returned, “There is some mistake here, Tom. Whoever thought that we meant to do without you, Sir Edmond, or I, or any one else? The steam-saw is put up, not to do without you, but so as to help us to get through more work; aye, and make the work easier for you too. Depend upon it once you see it at work, you’ll like it a deal better than sawing, as you have done, for hours together at a single trunk. You know what a lot of timber has been waiting in the woodyard for months; now we shall soon see that disappear; and why, Tom, it’s you I’ve been looking to, as a sharp fellow, to

manage the engine. You know Sir Edmond has always been a good master to you, and so have I to the best of my power. The least you can do is to wait and see how the new plan works, and then if you don't like it, you can throw up your places and seek work elsewhere."

I stopped, and waited to see what effect my words had.

There was a good deal of shuffling and looking at one another, and one pushing the other to the front, but no one spoke, and even Carvil began to look a little foolish. I took out my watch.

"Look here, Tom and the rest of you," I said, "it is just half-past eight, I will give you half an hour. At nine I shall expect you at the Hall—you, Tom, at the saw-pits, and Sam and Bill Giddens," I said, looking at one or two others, "and the rest of you at your usual work. If you come, well and good; if not, why I shall turn on the Fairlie men, they can be spared for a day or two, and we'll send for others to Rockhead. Only you know Sir Edmond expects his cottagers to work for him, so I can't say that if you refuse to keep your part of the bargain he'll keep his; you could hardly expect that, could you?" With that I left them, without waiting for an answer, but as I turned away I heard a general grunt of assent that augured well, a "That's fair measure enough," and

‘Thankee, sir,’ which made me more hopeful than when I first confronted the formidable-looking group.

By nine I was at the timber-yard, and greatly to my satisfaction found that there already was Tom Carvil taking his first lesson in the management of the engine, and there, all quietly at work as usual, the other men.

I looked round and saw that no one was missing, and then went about my own work without another word.

When Sir Edmond came down a week later for a night or two, the steam-saw was in full operation, and Tom Carvil established as foreman of the works, showing it off with as much pride as if it were his own especial property.

He was not insensible to the humour of the thing, and whether or not he caught a suspicion of a smile on my face, as he boasted of how Sir Edmond wanted to understand the working of the mill, and how he had had to explain it all, there was a twinkle in his eye as he said—

“Yer know, sir, I allus loiked Sir Edmond, and I hadn’t nothing against yer; it was only them engines, and now I loikes them too”



CHAPTER XIII.

"Not once or twice in our rough island story
The path of duty was the way to glory—
He that walks it, only thirsting
For the right, and learns to deaden
Love of self ; before his journey closes
He shall find the stubborn thistle bursting
Into glossy purples, which outred
All voluptuous garden roses."

FIVE years had passed away since I first became Sir Edmond's steward, and during that time little that is eventful had occurred to make any change in my life, or in that of those around me.

It had been a busy, on the whole a happy time with me, even though I might have days of loneliness and unuttered yearnings. I had found my work in life, and was satisfied with the doing it to the best of my power. In the daily discharge of my duties many were the new pleasures, the ways of usefulness and opportunities for helping others that came to me, and though my responsibility was a heavy one, and my days well filled, yet I was free

from anxious cares and much that makes life difficult and weary.

My home was still at Fairlie with Harold and Fortune. There time had worked fewer changes than might have been expected.

Harold, now that he had passed his first youth, was fast becoming the type of the prosperous British farmer, broad-shouldered and comfortable. He was strong and active enough, but the boyish agility, the youthfulness of the honest face had passed away, he was no longer the bright-eyed, handsome youth, but a fine-looking bearded man in the prime of life, of imposing stature and stalwart appearance. And to me he was still the same that he had ever been, the brother of my life, the one being closer and dearer to me than all the rest of the world and its millions.

Fortune, too, though still young, had grown matronly, her dainty figure had turned plump, almost awkward, and though she still kept her bright colour and pretty face, a good deal of her early charm was gone.

Harold was as devotedly fond of her as ever, and petted and fondled her as if she were still a child, and never, in my hearing at least, crossed a wish of hers, or heard her express one which he did not immediately seek to gratify.

Good Mrs. Mavor used to say that the only fault

she had to find with him was that of being too indulgent a husband, and that it was all very well as long as they had only themselves to think of, but that when children came they would find things were different, and Fortune would see she must put her shoulder to the wheel like other people.

But that time never came. Fortune, I think, was well content to be without children, and thought it just as well none of the cares her mother prophesied fell upon her, whilst Harold, on the contrary, would have given his ears for a child of his own, and often sighed over the fact that there was no son to carry down the old name.

"Ah, well, Laurie," he used to say in his pleasant way, "you will marry some day, and then there'll be sons of yours to keep alive the name in the old place."

But I as often shook my head, and said I had no intention of marrying; and, indeed, since the day when Harold had told me that Fortune was to be his wife, I had never looked twice at a girl, or had the smallest fancy for any one.

Such things were not for me, I said to myself, and as long as I had a home at Fairlie and my work to live for, I needed nothing further.

That year my time was particularly taken up, for it was the first time an industrial exhibition and flower show was held at Silscote for all the tenants

and inhabitants of the Wyncourt estates. The idea had originated with Sir Edmond, but the working it out and all the details of the plan were left to me, and the scheme was one that required a great deal of careful thought and arrangement.

Every one on the estate, not only in the valley, but on the outlying farms at Lynch and elsewhere, whether farmer, cottager, or labourer, might exhibit produce of his growing or specimens of his industry; and in order that the women might have a chance as well as the men, prizes were offered for the best needlework in all its shapes, and the best-made bread, butter, and cream. Even the bees who fed on the heather of Exmoor were not forgotten, and honey was one of the articles of manufacture included for general competition.

As early as the spring the announcement had been made, and towards the middle of August the valley was in a state of eager excitement from one end to the other.

At last the great day came—a true August day it was, fortunately for us, with fine weather, haze resting on the distant hills, and blue glooms on wood and moor, and Silscote looked its best with its gay adornings of flags and coloured streamers hanging in a line between the fine old walnut trees.

All the valley was astir that day, and from early morning I had been busy, superintending the

distribution of the various articles that arrived from every direction. The judging, too, was a serious business, for, although the head gardener of the Hall could easily select the best fruit and vegetables and flowers, it was no easy matter to decide between the respective merits of at least three dozen gigantic loaves, all of which had risen to perfection, and almost as many bowls of cream which looked as if a knife could stand erect in the midst of any of them, especially as in some cases the opinion of the judges as to taste and flavour did not always coincide. At two, however, the show was declared open, and by that time the hardest part of my work was over. I was discussing some of the last points with a group of young farmers, all with blue cards and rosettes stuck in their coats to show their official capacity as judges, when I saw Fortune come in with Harold, in a spotted lilac muslin gown, new for the occasion, and I turned to give her the welcome information that her double geraniums had won the first prize as window-pots.

Before we had done talking Sir Edmond himself came up, and begged me to take Lady Wyncourt and her children round the show before the crowd became too great, for people were pouring in from all sides now, and the Hall grounds were rapidly becoming one dense mass of moving heads.

I hastened to conduct her ladyship through the

different departments of the show, pointing out the goodly display of flowers and vegetables, purple figs of luscious taste, apples and turnips of prodigious size piled up in rows, side by side with Fortune's rose-coloured geraniums and the damask roses of the mill. Then there was the woodwork, a department to which the introduction of the saw-mill at Silscote had given fresh impetus ; picture-frames, book-shelves, chairs and tables, some inlaid with the different woods of the valley, others ornamented in various ways by the ingenuity of the workmen, invited attention ; and Tom Carvil had surpassed himself in the production of a beautifully-finished davenport with drawers and everything complete.

The children, however, were impatient to get to the coach-house where the loaves and butter and cream were exhibited, and all the while Lady Wyncourt was examining my contribution to the show, a collection of all the different ores and woods in the valley, Master Guy was pulling at the skirt of his mother's gown, and little Miss Helen kept whispering, "Do come away, mamma ; I want to taste the nice cream and that great big loaf which we saw carried in just now."

So we passed on to the tables where Mrs. Mavor and the Hall housekeeper had just finished the important task of deciding on the merits of the bread and cream, and the prize labels were being now

affixed, while the respective owners of the fortunate objects stood by, proud and smiling, dropping profound courtesies as her ladyship said a kind word to each in turn.

"Oh, look, mamma," cried Master Guy, "there is a big one; did you ever see such a loaf, and isn't the crust just beautiful, O my?"

"That's kissing crust," said little Miss Helen, turning her big eyes knowingly up to my face, "because Nunna always makes us give her a kiss before she cuts it for us."

"Whose is the loaf?" asked Lady Wyncourt. "I see it has won the first prize."

"Here's the name," said Master Guy, holding up the ticket, and beginning to spell out, J—u—d—i—t—h. "What does that spell, mamma? it sounds like Punch and Judy, and there's another word after it."

I was just bending down to see what the word was when I felt a hand pulling at my coat sleeves, and turning round saw Judith's well-known face behind me.

"Why, Judith," I said, "I never expected to see you here to-day; and is this your loaf that has won the prize? Well, I ought to have known no one but you could bake like that."

"Bless you, my laddie," she said, as she grasped my hand in both of hers, "I thought I'd have a try

with the rest on 'em, and at laist I'd get one sight on thee, laddie. And I've just been seeing o' Mrs. Isham, and she's asked me to step up to the old place for supper."

"You must stop the night, Judith; you can't think of going back to Lynch to-night," I said, as I held her hand, all tremulous with excitement, in mine. Poor old Judith, the sight of old faces was almost too much for her, and she could scarcely recover her scattered senses in time to answer Lady Wyncourt's kind expression of approval of this masterpiece in the baking line.

The curiosity of the children was meanwhile greatly excited at the appearance of this new face, and I heard Master Guy saying in a loud whisper—

"Listen, Helen, why she calls Mr. Isham *laddie*."

I had just had time to explain to her ladyship that Mrs. Pepper—Judith's proper appellation—had been our nurse and servant for many years, when I was called away by Sir Edmond to clear up a difficulty which had arisen.

A man who was known to no one in Silscote had arrived with a bundle of walking sticks, peeled and cut in variegated patterns and shapes of different kinds, and no one knew which department these were to be placed in, or whether the maker had any right to exhibit at all.

"There's the fellow," said Sir Edmond, pointing to a short, shaggy-looking man, evidently a shepherd from the hills, who stood with his sticks under his arm, the centre of a wondering group. We walked towards him, the children following with her ladyship, and expressing their astonishment in very audible whispers.

"What a funny man," said Miss Helen; "how short! And he's got a lot of hair all over his face."

"He's what we call a dwarf," pronounced Guy, with an elder brother's patronising air.

"Well, my man," asked Sir Edmond, "what is your name, and where do you come from?"

"I's Silas Pope," was the answer of the shaggy-haired shepherd; "an' it please your worship, I comes from High Coombe Farm, out yonder." And he pointed in the direction of the hills.

"I know the place," said Harold, who was standing by, "it lies out beyond Lynch; I've been there hunting, and a wild, bleak place it is."

Still I did not understand what had brought the man here, and I was looking at him much puzzled, when suddenly Sir Edmond exclaimed—

"Ah, I remember, quite right, my man. Isham," he continued, turning to me, and taking me a little aside, "that is just what I had meant to tell you, how High Coombe Farm had been left to me by

the will of the owner, old Mr. Stone, who died the other day. I knew him well in old days, but never thought he would remember me in his will, and I only heard of this last week. We shall have to see to it. But tell me, Silas," he said, addressing the shepherd, who stood, without stirring a muscle, awaiting the result of our colloquy, "tell me what made you think of bringing your sticks here?"

"Please your worship," said Silas, pulling his forelock a second time, "I was at Lynch, and heard as how the show was to be here, and at High Coombe we knows as your worship's the master now, and so I'd a mind to bring these here sticks on, and if they won't do, why they won't."

"They will do extremely well," said Sir Edmond, with a smile. "I am glad people at High Coombe have a better memory than I have, but they shall not be forgotten in future. Here, Isham, take the sticks into the carpentry department. To-morrow I must speak to you about this farm."

I took Silas and his works of art to a position where both attracted much interest, and his enterprise was duly rewarded by the adjudging of an extra prize, given by Lady Wyncourt.

After that I was free to return to Judith and Harold and the rest, and spend the afternoon with my friends among the gay company that strolled

over the pleasant slopes under the deepening shadows of the Hall trees.

Long was that day remembered in the valley, and in after years the first Exhibition at Silscote became a date from which people reckoned.

It was late in the evening, and the sun had already passed off the valley, although its parting brightness still lingered on the highest beacons of Exmoor, when the scattered throng gathered on the lawn under the cedars, to see the prizes given and hear Sir Edmond's closing words. As he ended a burst of cheering broke from the crowd. "Long life to Sir Edmond and the family, and thanks for the holiday," called out by a grey-headed tenant standing under the cedars with his hat in his hand, was taken up with acclamations, and the loud hurrahs rang again and again through the air.

Before the shouts had died away, a voice, which I recognised as Tom Carvil's, called out of the crowd—

"One more cheer for Mr. Isham ; him as gets all the pains and none on the thanks."

And another voice called out, "And what's more, there isn't a better master or a truer friend to us nor him."

The shout which met my name took me completely by surprise. Sir Edmond himself was

cheering, Master Guy joining in the shouts with boyish delight, and little Miss Helen was clapping her tiny hands and looked up in my face with laughing eyes as if to show me that she understood what it all meant.

But dearer than all to me was the deep ringing cheer which fell on my ears, for that came from the valley men, and I knew that it meant that my labours among them had not been thrown away, and I needed no other reward, saving, perhaps—for that I could ill have wished to be without—Sir Edmond's warm shake of the hand as I stood there by him.

Then we went home together, Harold clapping me on the back as proudly as could be, and Fortune saying how pleased I must be to feel how successful the day had been. Judith, too, was with us, carrying her prize loaf with some difficulty. She had in duty bound offered it to Sir Edmond, but he had good-naturedly told her it belonged of right to Fairlie, and she must take it to the old place, if only for "auld lang syne."

As we stood at the gate of the lane, where the wild roses and honeysuckles grew, and in the spring the white lilacs flower, exactly in the spot where Harold found me that memorable June evening years ago, and listened to the hurrahs of the lads as they went home, growing bold

in the darkness, I felt the words die on my lips, and I could only look up to those countless stars glowing like jewels in the midnight heavens, with silent thankfulness for all that had grown out of that day, and the work which, after all my fears and dark hours, had been given me to do in life.





CHAPTER XIV.

“O weary hearts! O slumbering eyes!
O drooping souls, whose destinies
Are fraught with fear and pain,
Ye shall be loved again!
No one is so accursed by fate,
No one so utterly desolate,
But some heart, though unknown,
Responds unto his own,
Responds—as if with unseen wings,
An angel touched its quivering strings,
And whispers, in its song,
‘Where hast thou stayed so long?’”



THE day after the Exhibition Sir Edmond showed me the deed by which High Coombe Farm had passed into his hands, and asked me to ride over and look at it, and see his new tenant. Reports had reached him that the farm was in a very bad condition, and he expected from what he heard that we should have to give the present tenant notice to quit, but he wished me to go and see the general condition of things with my own eyes and report upon them to him.

At dinner-time I asked Harold if he knew anything of the farmer at High Coombe, Ben Sabin, as he was named.

"I've just been asking Fred Malsbury, whom I met on the road an hour ago," said Harold, "and he tells me he's a shocking bad lot. I thought I remembered the fellow's name, and Malsbury says he was as hard a drinker as any man a few years back, and now he's pretty well done for himself, and is a wretched creature, who leaves his farm to take care of itself. Malsbury thinks he has a niece who keeps house and lives up there with him."

This unfavourable account of our new tenant was much what I expected from Sir Edmond's few words, and I did not particularly relish the errand on which I set out that afternoon.

It was a dull, oppressive kind of day, very unlike the brilliant clearness of yesterday. There were storms in the air, and the grey skies and deep purple of the hills had a threatening and gloomy appearance.

But the August glory was all round, the broom was breaking into gold, and the tufts of heather that mingled in the bracken at my feet were bright with crimson blossom.

Following the direction Harold had given me, I rode over Clytsall hill, as far as the road to Lynch, and then turned northwards across the open

moorland, and on for miles and miles over marshy ground, where sedge and tall rushes grew in the pools of standing water, and dark juniper bushes were the only trees to be seen. It was a dreary waste, very different from our lovely hill-sides and smiling meadows, and the gloominess of the day made the scene still more weird and desolate.

Nor was I in a particularly cheerful mood myself. The excitement and exertions of the day before had left me a little tired, and inclined to ruminate in a melancholy vein, and the sight of Judith, who had gone back to Lynch that morning, had awakened thoughts of old days in my breast.

Unconsciously I began comparing my life with that of my contemporaries, with Harold's, and others who like him had been happily married. Certainly my life had not been exactly what I anticipated in my young dreams, and although, with yesterday's events fresh in my recollection, I could not complain, yet I was still in a sense *alone*. For I was conscious of unspoken yearnings, of thoughts and feelings which even Harold, with all his warm affection, could not understand. In all these years, among all the many friends I had learnt to know, I had never yet found the one who could share my deepest feelings, and aim after the same objects, the same hopes, that I had set before me as the end of life.

From these gloomy thoughts I was aroused by

the signs of some human habitation near at hand, and I saw that I must be reaching the Coombe Farm.

I pressed on the good grey which Harold had lent me that day, and soon caught sight of a group of buildings and a thread of blue smoke curling up against the dusky purple of the hill-side.

It would have been a pretty spot on a bright day, for there was a thick growth of trees about the house, and the low walls and irregular line of the thatched roof had a picturesque appearance, but to-day everything looked dark and cheerless, and the neglected look of the place destroyed all pretensions to beauty in my eyes.

The fields through which I rode were overgrown with rank grass, the gates were broken and the posts crumbling away, there was a general appearance of bad farming and a great want of necessary repairs.

I began to prepare myself for a stern exercise of my authority, and, indeed, if the reports I had been hearing of Farmer Sabin's character were true, there was little danger of my feelings of compassion being put to a severe test.

As I drew nearer the house, however, I did notice that some attempts had been made to restore tidiness, the railings had been newly mended, the garden was dug and planted, and the gravel walk weeded,

although the house itself looked sadly tumble-down.

Sounds of a hatchet at work reached my ear from a back yard, and looking round I saw my friend Silas Pope at work chopping wood on the other side of a low wall.

He looked up from his work as he heard horse's hoofs, and grinned as he recognised me.

"So ye be coom already ; I's haven't been back loong mysell," was his greeting, but he did not lay down his hatchet or offer to take my horse.

"Shall I find your master in, Silas ?" I asked, reining up in front of the door.

Silas nodded.

"He's always in," he said, pointing to the window with his thumb ; "it ain't many inches as he stirs in a day."

"I'm afraid he is no longer able to be as active as a farmer's work requires," I said ; and Silas for sole answer looked up knowingly into my face, and then shook his shaggy locks, as if to say he knew that as well as I did.

"I suppose you do the chief work of the farm, Silas ?" I continued.

"I milks and digs the garden, and sees to the pigs and cows. But there's another nor he inside," and he pointed again to the house. "Ye'll see her if ye jist step in."

"Will you hold my horse, then, or let it stand in the stable for a few minutes?" I said.

Silas, however, did not move, but gave a long whistle, and presently a gipsy-looking woman, with a red handkerchief on her shoulders, and bold black eyes, looked out from the door with a surly frown on her face.

"Here, Lyddy," called Silas, "ye jist take this gen'elman's hoss, and ties him up in the stable."

The gipsy obeyed without a word.

I followed her to the stable, and saw the grey safely lodged in an empty stall. Then I returned to the front door, where I was met this time by a big mastiff, who came out of the house barking loudly at me. This was followed by another apparition. A pleasant young face, with a pair of clear brown eyes, looked out of the window for one moment, and a voice called, "Down, Lion; Lion, down!" Then the face vanished again. I heard the sound of footsteps, and the dog turned round and fawned and wagged his tail, as his young mistress appeared at the door.

"Miss Sabin, I think?" I said, lifting my hat; and the farmer's niece bowed slightly as I continued, "I must beg your pardon for this sudden intrusion, but I am steward to Sir Edmond Wyncourt, the new landlord."

"Mr. Isham," said Miss Sabin, and the brown

eyes met mine frankly as she continued : "Silas told us this morning you would come before long. I am sorry Lion gave you so rude a welcome, but he is not much used to strangers. You will come in, though, I hope, and see my uncle?"

She led the way into a back kitchen, where a man not past middle age, but prematurely aged and broken in appearance, sat with both elbows on a table in front of him, staring vacantly into the fire.

He looked up with a scowl as I came in, and Miss Sabin said—

"Uncle, this is Mr. Isham, Sir Edmond's steward."

"What business has he here?" growled the wretched man, looking at his niece almost fiercely. "Haven't I told you I wouldn't have Sir Edmond or any of his lot here? But it's all your fault, Cecily, you always plague me, that you do."

The poor girl blushed up to her eyes, but said, with a quiet presence of mind that surprised me—

"Mr. Isham has come on business, about the farm, uncle; but if you like he can speak to me in the parlour."

The farmer's expression instantly changed.

"Yes, yes, go into the parlour and talk to him." And then, turning to me with an abject look, he said, "You'll not be hard, sir, on a poor sick man;

and Dr. Johnson says I've not long to live—not long," he repeated, shaking his head to and fro.

It was only Miss Sabin's presence that restrained me from expressing the disgust I felt at the sight of this melancholy object, as I followed her into another room, and she said, with an appealing look at me—

"My uncle cannot bear strangers; you must forgive him if he seemed rude."

I hastened to assure her there was nothing to forgive, and she continued, as she closed the door behind her—

"Perhaps now you will kindly tell me anything you may wish my uncle to know."

"Am I to understand, then, that you manage for him?" I said with a smile, of which her quiet answer made me ashamed—

"I have tried to do what I could since I have lived here, but that is only the last six months, since my aunt, *his* sister, died. I used to live near Taunton, till my mother died a year ago, and then, as uncle was the only relative I had left, and he had no one else to live with him, I came here. I know," she continued, as I paused more out of surprise at her quiet courage than from any other reason, "I know the farm is in a very bad state, but I am trying to improve it, and I hope to get a good deal done this autumn."

"Well, Miss Sabin," I said, "the long and short is, that I came by Sir Edmond's orders to report upon the state of things, and, if necessary, give your uncle notice to quit."

She flushed, and I noticed a troubled look on her brow as I spoke.

"You could not give us half a year to see what we can do in that time?" she asked, looking at me inquiringly.

"Well," I said, "it rests with Sir Edmond of course. He is the last man to wish to do any one an injustice. If he sees the farm put in good working order he would be satisfied. Let me see," I said, with a half fear that I was overstepping the limits of my authority in my compassion for the girl, "let us say, for instance, by next rent-day, that falls somewhere after Christmas."

"Thank you," she said, breathing more freely. "Of course I would be responsible for the rent. We have last year's hay still, and the wool too to sell. But whatever happens, that shall be paid. And I will do my best to satisfy your requirements. Perhaps you would like to look round while you are here; if so, Silas can take you over the farm."

I replied that I had already seen most of the fields, for the farm was not a large one; but moving to the window, I pointed out two or three measures that struck me as advisable—a bit of ground that

wanted digging, a fence that was broken down, and a few other things. Miss Sabin listened gratefully, and I was more than ever surprised at the intelligence and good sense she showed.

Then she begged me to look at the roof of the house, and other repairs that needed executing, and which I promised should be seen to at once. Afterwards we returned to the kitchen, where I found Farmer Sabin in a quieter mood; but I soon found it was hopeless to press advice upon him, and I took my leave before many minutes, refusing Miss Sabin's proffered hospitalities, as it was drawing late and I had a long ride before me. She accompanied me to the door, and kept the mastiff in check by her hand and voice.

"I too used to know the valley once," she said, as Silas led round the grey. "Years ago my father had a farm at Ruccambe, and I used to go to school at Rockhead with your sister-in-law, Fortune Mavor that was."

"Indeed," I said, beginning to feel great interest in this girl, and glad to find links in the past which might bring us into closer acquaintance, "you must come and see Fortune, then, some day."

"I know Mrs. Pepper too," she said presently. "Judith Pepper I mean, who lives at Farmer Fall's, at Lynch. That is not so far off, you know, and I

have seen her several times in the last few months, and know her better than any one else about here."

This pleased me, but it made me feel forcibly what a dreary, lonely life this was for a girl to lead, out on this wild moor, with scarcely a creature to speak to from one week's end to another.

"I am afraid this must be a desolate place to you after the life you have been used to," I could not help saying compassionately as I left her.

Miss Sabin coloured, but she answered pleasantly—

"Oh, it looks rather dreary now; but we get on very well on the whole."

I noticed a little sigh at the end of her sentence, and thought there was something wistful in the dark eyes that roved over the moor out towards the thread of blue sea in the distance. It seemed almost cowardly to be leaving her there, with that wretched dotard and the gipsy woman for her sole companions, and I could not help saying to Silas as I passed him still hewing at his wood—

"Take care of your young mistress, Silas."

Silas grinned from ear to ear, and gave me another of those knowing looks of his, as much as to say, "Trust me."

"She's a rare cratur!" was what he did say, chuckling over his words to himself. "I doesn't

mind as how I be putten aboot by such as her, for whether she be caisten' her eyes oop or doon, she's the swatest smile as ever I seen."

I laughed as I put spur to the grey, and trotted off at a good pace across the moor. The clouds had broken out in the west, and a wild sunset was flaming the heavens, turning the long-ridged moorland a rich olive green, and the pools between the juniper bushes blood red. There was a weird, uncanny aspect in the landscape that made me glad to see our valley again, looking more like a happy valley than ever, as its green slopes were unrolled before me, dotted over with cottages and churches, and rich with deep-coloured plough and golden woods.

Better still it was to see the light in the window at Fairlie, and find supper spread, and Fortune and Harold ready with a warm welcome.

"After all, Laurence Isham," I said to myself as I sat down with them, "there are harder lives than yours," and I felt a coward and a grumbler to have been sighing over my lot as I rode over the moor that afternoon.





CHAPTER XV.

"Like driftwood spars which meet and pass
Upon the boundless ocean-plain,
So, on the sea of life, alas!
Man nears man, meets, and leaves again."



TOLD Harold and Fortune the story of my adventures that evening, and as soon as Fortune heard Miss Sabin's name she remembered the old companion of her school-days, and was full of curiosity and interest as to her present condition.

"Cecily Sabin, of course I remember her. She was several years younger than me though, and was quite a little thing when we all used to go to school at Rockhead." I saw her once afterwards, though; let me see, she came to Ruccambe on a visit to the Winters. Don't you remember her, Harold, the time we went over to the school feast three years ago last July?"

"A tall girl, was she?" said Harold, drowsily, from the arm-chair in which he was going to sleep

over *Bell's Messenger*. "Tall and pale, with a pleasant face and dark eyes, that's about all I remember of her."

"Yes, that was her," said Fortune, "but you know you thought her very nice then, for when I told you how Peggy Winter said Dick wanted to marry her, and Cecily wouldn't have anything to say to him you said quite right, too, for she was much too good for him."

"Well, I think so still. I pity the girl who would take Dick Winter," said Harold, laughing. "Fancy having to put up with that fellow's swagger every day of one's life."

My interest was keenly excited by this time, and I listened eagerly as Fortune continued, with her little laugh—

"I never had any fancy for Dick either, but surely it would have been better for Cecily Sabin than living in this dreary, out-of-the-way place Laurence talks of, with that horrid old uncle. And Dick has a comfortable home to offer, and I believe he likes her as well as he ever did any one."

Harold shrugged his shoulders, and said—

"Tastes differ, and I'd rather, for my part, were I a woman, put up with a good deal than be Dick Winter's wife."

I said nothing, but the idea of one so refined and gentle as Cecily Sabin being the wife of Dick was

repulsive in the extreme, and I hated to think he had dared to dream of such a thing.

It was strange, too, to hear Fortune talk in this way of Dick. It took me back to old days and the night of Farmer Malsbury's dance when he had been my rival in her favour, and I thought, a little sadly, that in those days Fortune would not have spoken so prudently, or weighed the advantages of a loveless marriage as dispassionately as she did now.

Still what I had heard of Cecily could only increase my respect for her, and as regarded her I could not regret what Fortune had told me.

The next day I gave Sir Edmond a faithful report of all I had seen and heard at High Coombe.

He agreed that the only thing to do was to wait till over next rent-day and see how Miss Sabin fulfilled her promise, and in the meantime he added, "You had better keep an eye on the place, ride over now and then, I mean, and see how things look, and if you see your way to giving her a hint or two so much the better. I never like to turn out a tenant unless it is absolutely necessary."

I did not need to have this last point urged upon me. That young girl, living up there all alone with the miserable uncle and the shepherd and gipsy woman, was a figure that had taken my fancy

strangely. There was something in the wild loneliness of the place, the strangeness of the surroundings that caught my imagination. Often and often, as I sat by our own happy fire-side, the memory of the dark eyes that met mine, so full of trouble at her uncle's angry words, would come back to me, and I wondered what she was doing and how things fared with her. There was a gentleness, a perfect womanliness about her, united with a courage and simplicity that attracted me singularly; and then she was an orphan, and almost alone in the world, which could not but engage my compassionate interest.

So I rode to High Coombe more than once that autumn, and, as Sir Edmond desired, kept an eye on the farm. I noticed with satisfaction a gradual change for the better in the appearance of the land; the fences were repaired, the ground carefully cleaned, and every improvement that I had suggested carried out.

But though I frequently saw my friend Silas, and though he would always greet me with a friendly nod, as if to say that he and I understood each other thoroughly, I very rarely ventured to trouble Miss Sabin, or thought of entering the house.

One of the few times I had thought of calling upon her or her uncle I was deterred from my intention by hearing that another gentleman was in

the house already, and just as I was turning my horse's rein homewards I was startled by hearing a voice behind me, and looking round found it was Sir Edmond.

We rode home together, my master and I, talking as we went of the farm and other business matters, and I was amused at Sir Edmond's saying, before I parted from him—

“By-the-by, Laurence, I had a long talk with Miss Sabin to-day up at High Coombe. That girl has some stuff in her certainly, withal she looks so young and quiet. I tell you, Isham, I don't know a man among all my tenants with half as much pluck as that girl has. It's a wretched life for her, too, with that man. It is awful to think that human kind should sink so low; I never saw a more miserable specimen of what drink can do for a man. Poor girl! poor girl!” he went on repeating, half aloud to himself as was his habit. “But we mustn't be hard upon her, mind, Isham, we mustn't be hard upon her.”

I cannot say that I ever was much afraid of there being any danger of this being the case as regards myself, although Sir Edmond did seem to dread the exercise of any undue severity on my part towards Miss Sabin.

The rent-day came.

It was late in January. A long continuance of

wet weather had made it bad travelling over our roads, and now the first snow had fallen on the hills, and in the ditches and under the hedges it lay in drifts of pure untrodden white.

The sun shone out through the clouds that morning, and as I waited at the Hall door the cedars lifted their snow-laden branches against a sky of pale blue.

It was a good old custom that at Christmas time each tenant on the Wyncourt estate brought his or her rent in person, and paid it down to Sir Edmond on the spot, from the topping farmers who held our valley lands to the poorest cottagers who owned a hut on the waste.

So as I stood in the gallery outside Sir Edmond's library a perfect stream of comers and goers passed to and fro, carrying their rent in their hands.

My duties were light on these occasions, for I had only to be within easy call of my master in case explanations were required, and was free for the most part to talk with the different tenants, all of whom were by this time well-known to me.

I had been wondering whether Silas would appear on behalf of Farmer Sabin or Miss Sabin herself, or who, but as yet no one had arrived to represent High Coombe, and my thoughts began to take another direction.

Across the lapse of years I found them going

back to that day when I followed the old butler along that same gallery.

The picture of the beautiful boy in blue velvet with flowing curls still hung there, and the doors of the boudoir at the end were thrown open. I could see the bow-window looking out on the hills, and the angels that had seemed so bright and heavenly to me that day of my childhood. The motto was gone long ago, but the pictures were still there, and the lesson they had taught was yet fresh in my memory, only that the experience of years had given it many a new and deeper meaning.

"They also serve who only stand and wait."

Just now it seemed to say that God does not count time as we do, that years in His sight are but an instant, and the long waiting times which come in our lives are given that we may learn the full meaning of His love, learn to see in each event, each new phase in our lives, a fresh revelation of Himself.

I was roused from my reverie by the sound of Sir Edmond's voice, which came in rather a higher key than usual from the open door of the library.

I looked round with interest, for I had just seen Fred Malsbury go in.

He was nephew to my father's old friend, but very unlike the rest of his family, being something

of a dandy, with a decided taste for sporting, and not much of a farmer.

He had just passed me in a get-up of faultless perfection, with gold chain and seals dangling, and ringed hands, and as he went in nodding to me in his free and easy way, I felt half amused, half sorry for the young man, knowing as I did that his land was far from being as well seen to as might be, and that Sir Edmond had a sharp word in store for him.

He had, in his careless, easy way, forgotten to close the door behind him, and I could hear Sir Edmond's voice plainly as he said, after some minutes' conversation—

“For mind you, Malsbury, I'll have no nonsense. If you are too much of a fine gentleman to attend to your farm, the sooner we part the better. I would be sorry to lose one of your name, and I am not fond of changing tenants, but it is no use to mince matters, and I tell you, as I tell each farmer I have, that you must mind your business and look to things yourself, if you mean to remain my tenant.”

Poor Fred Malsbury came out, looking sadly crest-fallen, and I was turning to say a kind word to him, when my attention was attracted by voices outside, and looking out of the window I saw Silas Pope, got up in a brown velveteen coat and check tie for the occasion, so smart, indeed, that were it

not for his shaggy hair and twinkling eyes, I should not have recognised him, sitting in a high gig, holding the reins of a rough-looking horse. A group of tenants had gathered round him, and were joking him good-naturedly over his steed ; but I did not have time to look how he received their observations, for at the same moment a woman figure moved by me, and I saw Miss Sabin, in her black gown, with no colour about her but the bright flush on her cheek, pass into the library.

I was standing in the window recess so she did not see me, but through the library door I caught sight of Sir Edmond's courteous bow as he rose to receive her and offer her a chair, and then himself closed the door after her.

After about ten minutes Sir Edmond opened the door again, and Miss Sabin came out, looking the same as usual, only there was more colour in her face than usual, and her eyes had a soft, shining look. Then I ventured to come forward, and she met me with a frank shake of the hand, and a cordial "Good morning !"

I ventured to say that I hoped her interview had been satisfactory. She answered with a deep sigh of relief and a grateful glance, as she said—

"O yes, thank you. Sir Edmond has been so good. I can never be thankful enough to him and to you," she added, presently.

I followed her down the oaken staircase, and asked if I could do nothing for her, but she declined all offers of assistance, saying that Silas was there with her, and I could only help her to her seat in the gig.

I asked her if she would not go and see my sister-in-law and her old school-fellow, to which she agreed, and told Silas to drive on to Fairlie, while I went back to the house, inwardly grumbling at the long rent-dinner which took place that afternoon, and at which it was my fate to have to take one end of the table, opposite the arm-chair in which Sir Edmond presided.

I found Sir Edmond eagerly expecting me, and he came out of his room to meet me, and said, with boyish gladness—

“Isham, look here, Miss Sabin has been and paid her rent down like the best of them. I felt half inclined to give it her back again. But I have promised to let things be, on the understanding, of course, that she should continue to manage for her uncle. And I’ve promised, too, that the house should be put into thorough repair, so mind and see to that, Isham. She has done her part, and it is high time we should do ours.”

That evening, when I got home, I heard from Fortune the account of Miss Sabin’s visit.

She had been there and had dined with Harold

and Fortune, and had seen the place. But beyond speaking warmly of Sir Edmond's kindness and admiring the valley, I could not make out from Fortune that she had said much.

I was glad of it, though. I was glad, as I looked out on the hills with their creamy mantle of snow rising against the tender blue, to think that she had been there, that her feet had rested, if only for a moment, on the threshold of the old place, that her presence had left its gentle influence to add one more dear memory to the home of my childhood.

She had been and gone, and I could not quite put away a feeling of selfish regret at the thought that now she needed me no longer. My advice was no more required by her ; she could dispense with my good offices, my superintendence. Henceforth she would be nothing to me, nor I to her.





CHAPTER XVI.

"Now the night arose in silence,
Birds lay in their leafy nest,
And the deer couched in the forest,
And the children were at rest.
There was only a sound of weeping,
From watchers around a bed ;
But rest to the weary spirit,
Peace to the quiet dead."



ONCE more it was September, and once again the stag-hounds were to meet at Clytsall. It was as golden a morning as ever rose on the valley, and Harold was in high spirits at the sight of the sunshine, and was going to hunt his faithful grey.

"You'll come too, Laurence, shan't you?" he said ; but I had an engagement at the Board of Guardians at Rockhead, and told him I should drive in, and give up hunting.

"And you, Fortune?" he said, looking at her and remembering that both horses would be out.

Fortune hung her head and said rather pettishly

that she supposed she must stop at home, since we both wanted our horses, and she could not walk so far as Clytsall Hill.

"Can't you have the mill-cart? What is your father doing?" suggested Harold.

But the miller's horse was lame, and Fortune knew he would not hear of its being used.

"There are the Malsburys, they are sure to be going," said Harold, "I'll go round and ask them to take you."

"No, pray don't," said Fortune. "They've a large party, their cousins from Ruccambe and others, and I saw Kate last night and told her I was afraid I shouldn't be at the meet, and she said she wished they had room in their trap."

Harold looked vexed. He could not bear that his wife's wish should not be gratified, and was quite ready, I could see, to sacrifice his own day's pleasure, and give up the grey that had been carefully saved up for the stag-hunt.

"It's no use," said Fortune, with more good-humour than I had expected of her, "I must just stop at home."

"I wish you could come," said Harold, disconsolately, playing as he spoke with her light curling hair. But he did not say a word to me, knowing as he did that I was strict in attending the Board, and never missed the meetings if possible.

"I tell you what," said I, "I think I could take you up to Clytsall, Fortune, if you are content to see the meet and come away. There would be just time to drive round on the way to Rockhead."

"O do, Laurence, thank you so much," said Fortune, clapping her hands with girlish vivacity. "I can walk down, too, easily enough, it is only the pull up there that I'm afraid of."

"It is a great deal too good of Laurie," said Harold, looking bright again, and laughing at his wife. "There, be off with you, Madam Fortune, and make yourself fit to be seen, for it will be time to start before long, and mind you make yourself very agreeable to that brother of ours who spoils you so shamefully."

Fortune ran upstairs, laughing merrily, and we went out to see to the getting ready of the trap.

It was an insignificant little scene enough, of a kind that was very common in our daily life, but events that followed have left it deeply graven in my memory, and those few words of mine were a cause of thankfulness to me my whole after life.

"That's my wife," said Harold, proudly, as he lifted Fortune, in her clean cambric and pretty pink bonnet, up into the gig, and himself mounted the grey to ride after us.

The fine morning had brought all the world early to the meet, and a few minutes after we reached

Clytsall the tufters were put in, and a stag roused from its hiding-place in the wood below.

Off went the field, Harold among them, turning to give us a parting wave of his hand as he rode off. I liked to see him on horseback, enjoying himself with as much youthfulness and spirit as ever, and the grey, with its high mettle and fine paces, was a never-failing delight to him.

Fortune had found the Malsburys, who invited her to join them and spend the afternoon on the hills, promising to take her home, so I was free to go about my business.

The meeting proved a long one, and I was detained some hours in Rockhead. When I drove out the afternoon was already wearing on, and the splendour of noontide was passing into the rich glow of evening. As I drove along the high bit of road overlooking the valley, and saw the sea turning a milky blue under the red sunset, and Durstone Rocks shining with faint amethyst hues, I slacked my horse's rein, and lingered to gaze on the lovely sight before me, recalling those lines where the poet sings of the "Island-valley of Avilion"—

"Where falls not hail or rain, or any snow,
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies
Deep-meadowed, happy, fair, with orchard lawns,
And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea."

Then I passed several riders going home from

the stag-hunt, and I heard from one of these that the hounds had gone away over High Coombe. I looked to see if Harold were among them, but there were no signs of the grey. No doubt he had gone on with the hunt, for he liked a long day, and did not care how far from home he left off.

I had reached the point where the road branches off for Ruccambe and Silscote, when I saw a rider coming down the steep hill from Ruccambe at a gallop. I looked to see who the reckless rider might be. Fred Malsbury it was, and as he drew nearer I was noticing how bespattered with mud both he and his horse were, when suddenly he called to me by name.

"Mr. Isham," he said breathlessly, "I was going in search of you. Your brother has had rather a nasty accident in the field, up away on the moor near High Coombe. His horse came down, jumping a deep ditch in some rough ground up there and he fell upon a bit of steep rock, and is, I am afraid, a good deal hurt."

My heart was in my mouth at the young man's first words. Harold had had an accident—where was he?—had a doctor been sent for?—did Fortune know?

Yes, a doctor had been sent for, Dr. Johnson from Lynch, and he had been carried into the Coombe Farm, and Fred Malsbury had come

meantime to fetch Fortune and me. Evidently they thought the hurt more serious than Malsbury liked to tell me, although he said no one knew what it was exactly, when he left to ride after me. There was no time to be lost. I asked him to drive on in my trap to Fairlie and fetch Fortune, and getting into his saddle, I rode across the moor in the direction of High Coombe, as fast as the horse could carry me. And terrible that ride was, with the sickening dread at my heart, the horrible fear taking more real and vivid a shape every moment in my mind, that I might be too late, that already Harold might be—I could not bear to finish out the thought. At last I reached the Coombe Farm, and flinging myself from the horse's back, I threw the rein to one of the men that stood about, and entered the house. The big mastiff dog lay hushed, and silent on the doorstep, and just within Miss Sabin met me, pale but quiet as ever.

"Thank God you are come," she said, and then with a pitying tenderness in her voice she continued, "He is still alive, but we fear the worst." Without a word I followed her into a back room, where the Lynch doctor stood by the bedside on which Harold lay, a prostrate, insensible form.

His arms moved restlessly to and fro, and he was talking in wild, broken sentences, his mind still running on the stag-hunt.

Since they had brought him in, he had been in this lifeless condition, taking no notice of what passed in the room, and only uttering a feeble moan at intervals.

But as I bent over him in my speechless agony, I saw that he was trying to speak, and caught fragments of confused sentences that escaped his lips. Poor fellow! his mind was still running on the stag-hunt.

"I know it's a hard jump, but the grey's up to it—the best horse in all the country round. I shall never ride her again though, never any more now."

The doctor signed to me to speak to him, in hopes of recalling consciousness.

"Harold," I said, in a broken voice, "Harold, Harold, don't you know me?"

The familiar sound brought back a passing gleam of intelligence.

"Laurence," he said, with a smile like that with which he used to meet me years ago when he came in from a ride, "Laurence—ah! yes, he was always the best at books and everything. I was a dull fool, though I could ride and was strong in the arm, but, Laurie, Laurie, he knows it all. Call him and tell him the milking's done, and the horses are all in the stable, and I've paid the men. It's getting dark now; there's no more work to do to-night, it's too late now, too late."

Then it was the sea he was on, in a boat on Weplock Bay, and a fresh breeze was blowing, and we were pulling against the tide, and could see the lights of Fairlie shining up there above on the hill; but whatever it was that passed before his mind, he and I were always together.

It was heartrending to hear him talk thus, and meet the same unconscious gaze in his eyes while I stood there helpless and despairing. At last I felt as if I could bear it no longer, and I went out into the next room and looked out to see if Fortune were coming.

But there were no signs of horse or trap along the road that led across the moor. Far as the eye could reach there was nothing but wide open moorland with the blue line of sea beyond, and the golden tones of the sunset dying into a long whiteness out in the west.

Miss Sabin was watching at the window too, and though she did not speak, her eyes met mine with the same look of gentle compassion, as if she felt that my grief must be beyond reach of all human comfort.

Then I went back to Harold's bed-side and waited.

He was quieter now, and had ceased the moanings that were so painful to hear.

But his breathing grew every minute slower and shorter, and the look on the doctor's face told me better than any words that no hope was left.

There was a long silence, broken only by the ticking of the clock on the stairs and the voices of the birds singing in the branches outside the window.

And all the while I stood by the bed-side, listening to the breathing that seemed to become more difficult, and watching every change that passed over the features of the dear countenance.

At last Harold opened his eyes again, and his lips moved as if he wished to speak.

I bent over him, and fancied I caught his wife's name.

"Fortune?" I said; "yes, Fortune is coming. I hope she will be here very soon—directly."

He only gave a sigh in return. I asked if he had any thing for me to tell her.

"No, never mind," was all he said, and then closed his eyes wearily again. But presently he put out his hand towards me as if trying to find mine, and I held it in a long clasp without daring to speak.

He was quite conscious now, but power of speech was fast failing him. I saw his lips trying to form words, and listened intently. All I could catch was something about "*home*." But whether it was the old earthly home that he had loved so dearly to which his thoughts were turning, or whether he felt that another and a safer home was opening to him, I was never to know.

Once more he made another effort, and this time I heard clearly the words—

“Good-bye, Laurie boy, you'll be good to Fortune, and take care of her;” and I knew by that that he felt he was dying.

After that he never spoke, only his eyes sought mine in a tender, consoling gaze as if they would speak the farewells his lips could not utter, and bid me not to grieve.

His had always been a brave and simple nature, and he met death now with the same quiet, manly spirit he had ever shown.

The silence seemed to grow deeper. In the darkening twilight the birds had ceased their songs, and the hush that falls upon dying moments was making itself felt in the chamber of death.

Harold had turned his face to the window, and his eyes were seeking the fading light. His senses were closed to earthly things, but in that outer stillness there was an inner consciousness living all the while, and I felt his spirit was communing with the God before Whom he would shortly stand.

The breath came in quick, fluttering gasps now, and the hand that rested in mine was growing cold.

I could not speak or weep. In that moment I forgot the first terrible shock, forgot even that it was Harold who lay there dying, and only felt the awful

calm of that hour when the soul, leaving its earthly abode, passes into the presence of God.

A few minutes more, and there was a pause in the breathing and then a gentle sigh, and I knew that all was over.

The change that passes so quickly over the faces of the dead had come already, and I heard the doctor saying to me kindly—

“You had better come away, sir.”

Those words, with their quiet certainty, brought a terrible revulsion of feeling with them.

“O Harold, Harold!” I cried, with the wild agony of the helpless yearning with which we seek to bring back our best beloved from the grave, unthinking that our voices can no longer reach them, that even the power of love cannot recall them again to our arms.

But an answer came. I was not alone, another was standing by me—a voice, not Harold’s, was saying—

“He has been spared all pain. It is well with him now.”

I looked up and saw Miss Sabin standing by the window.

“Look,” she said, “how calmly he is sleeping. To see him look like that we can scarcely wish him back again, can we?”

But I only knew that I was without a brother.



CHAPTER XVII.

"Glitters the dew and shines the river,
Up comes the lily and dries her bell;
But two are walking apart for ever,
And wave their hands for a mute farewell.
Farther, farther; I see it—know it,
My eyes brim over, it melts away:
Only my heart to my heart shall show it,
As I walk desolate day by day."

IF the days which followed I cannot speak here.

In all the bitterness and desolation of that terrible time there is only one memory that I dare dwell upon, and shall treasure to my dying day.

What Miss Sabin was then, how she moved among us in all the darkness and wretchedness, like some good angel, bringing blessing and light wherever she passed, no words can ever express.

She it was who met Fortune at the door—where, poor thing, she only arrived to hear that she was too late to see her husband, for she had been at the

mill, and had missed Fred Malsbury—met her, and broke the dreadful news to her, and then after the first burst of grief, soothed and tended her with all a sister's tender care.

Miss Sabin it was too who made all the last sad arrangements, sparing me all that was not absolutely necessary, and settling everything with a wisdom and forethought I had never expected of a woman. She, too, it was whose gentle words first gave me any gleam of comfort, who made me feel that all was not lost, all not ended even though the greatest joy of my life was taken from me ; that my great love need not be buried away in darkness, but might live on yet in that unseen world ; that it was well for him, aye, and not for him only, but for us who were left to walk in sorrow and desolation without him.

I understood not half of her meaning then, but by slow degrees I learnt it afterwards, and I know now that it may be expedient for us that our dearest should go away, in order that by their loss we may learn more of that other world within the veil, and that, however dark and emptied of joy life may seem to be at times, we need never despair, since God can in marvellous ways give us back the freshness and fulness which we think have vanished from earth for ever.

But for long, very long, it did seem to me that

all that was lovely and pleasant in life had been buried with Harold, in the grave where we laid him by my father and mother in the quiet churchyard in the hills.

Fortune did not return to Fairlie. Poor thing, grief was so new to her, and she had been terribly shaken by the shock, and dreaded the sight of the home where we had all been so happy together.

So she went to her parents at the mill, where at least every care and tenderness that affection could give was lavished upon her. And I went back by myself to live alone at Fairlie, where Fortune's geraniums were still flowering in the windows, and Harold's gun and hats were lying about, and everything reminded me of a past that had been so cruelly torn from me. Torn away, not by slow degrees, with a warning to accustom my heart to it, but at one blow all the dear delights of youth swept away out of sight, without a single face of all I had loved being left to cheer the greatness of my loneliness.

But even then I was not without friends. On the contrary, every one was good to me. People I had never thought had the least care for me exerted themselves to show me little kindnesses, sending me presents, coming to inquire for me, contriving in numberless ways to do me services and brighten my solitude. Fred Malsbury touched me by the

real help he gave me in over-looking the farm, which now fell on my hands besides all my own business, and Sir Edmond showed me a sympathy and warmth of regard that I have never since forgotten.

My evenings were usually spent at the mill. Fortune clung to me with touching affection, and it was strangely moving to me as I rode in at supper time, to see that poor little white face looking so young under the widow's cap, with all the bright hair pushed away, watching for my return.

She seemed to take so little pleasure in other things that I began to think she might wish to return to Fairlie, but when I suggested this to Mrs. Mavor she shook her head, and said—

“Better not, Laurie; here at least she can stir about, and I can make her help me with little things, but up there, bless the child, she'd sit all day with her hands before her and fret. Besides, there's her father, who couldn't bear to let her go a second time, he always did think there was no one like her.”

After that, I thought no more about it, only I just said to Fortune that of course my home would be hers if ever she needed another besides her parents' house; and she thanked me, and said she should not like to leave them now, but added that she did not like to think of my living all alone, with only a servant girl, and would not I have Judith back.

It was strange I should not have thought of it before, but somehow I had been so crushed by the weight of my sorrow that I had neither energy nor spirit to form any fresh plans, and Fortune's idea came to me like an inspiration. Judith should come back. At least I would have the pleasure of making her happy in the old place among all she had loved best. What if she were old and crusty, she was still Judith to me, and no one else could ever be the same, the one link remaining to bind me with the dear old days; so the very next day I drove over to Lynch, and pulled up at Farmer Falls' door. It was opened by Judith herself—Mrs. Pepper as she was known there—in the most stiffly starched cap and apron, looking more severe and rigid than ever.

She was beginning to inform me that Farmer Falls was out, when suddenly she broke off in the middle of her sentence, and burst out—

“Why, laddie, if it isn't thee thyself, Master Laurie to be sure, whom I've been a pining to see again for weeks and weeks; an' to think as how I should not know thee, bless thee, laddie.”

After a little conversation I told her how I had come to ask her if she would come and live at Fairlie, and keep house for me as she had in the old days before Harold married and when father was alive.

The thought of it brought tears of joy to Judith's eyes. She could scarcely speak for delight, and I thought it necessary to remind her of the alterations that she would find at Fairlie, and how it would be a quiet, dull place now, very unlike the bright home she remembered.

But all this appeared to have very little effect upon her. Of course she would come, now directly, if I would let her, and leave Farmer Falls to shift for himself; not that he had not been a good master to her, but I—I was her ain laddie.

"And you are sure you will be happy, Judith, even though the poor old place is so much changed?"

"Sure!" she repeated. "And if I were no how sure, thinks thee I'd leave thee to pine alone, my poor laddie, I who'd follow thee to the world's end?"

"And what will Farmer Falls say?" I asked with a smile, beginning to feel that I was playing Judith's master a very shabby trick in thus beguiling his trusty servant away from him.

"Oh, he'll never take it amiss," said Judith recklessly, "and if he does, why I dunna care; but he won't; and I knows of a likely gal, as poor maister used to say, who'll dairy as well or better nor I can."

This extraordinary concession on Judith's part

showed her to be indeed in a mood of superlative contentment, and when I started on my drive back, promising to return and fetch her as soon as Farmer Falls could spare her, I left her standing at the door wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron and repeating, "Only to think on't, only to think on't."

Fortunately Farmer Falls showed a philosophical temper equal to the occasion, that is to say, seeing that his housekeeper had resolved to leave, he consented to lose her with a very good grace, and when I next drove over to Lynch, I found Judith ready waiting, with her brass-nailed box, and a bandbox tied round with a blue and white check handkerchief in her hand.

"What's that under your shawl, Judith?" I asked, seeing that she was carefully guarding something she held concealed there, as she climbed up into the cart.

"'Tis a flower-pot," she said, disclosing a beautiful white azalea in full blossom, "which I'm taking for Mrs. Isham, poor lamb; she always was such a one for pots, and I dare say she's no altered for all her trouble."

I felt this was a delicate attention on Judith's part, and Fortune fully appreciated it. She came up to Fairlie that day for the first time and helped Judith to settle.

She asked to see the grey, which had escaped unhurt in the fall which had cost her master his life, and patted her long mane and shed a few tears over her. But she seemed quiet and natural, and talked without effort of her wishes as to the removal of her own possessions to the mill.

I begged her to take anything that she liked away with her, but she would only have one or two of the pictures and books that had belonged to Harold, saying there was not much room in the mill; and I could not regret her decision, for it would have been hard to part with the old furniture and things that all spoke to me of him.

Judith was of the two by far the most overcome by her feelings, and broke down so completely when Fortune wished her good-bye, that I was quite afraid of the effect her emotion might have on the poor young widow.

However, Fortune retained her composure fairly, and I took her back to her parents, and returned to find Judith fluctuating between tears and laughter, grief over the mournful associations that met her on every side, and the joy of being back again.

"How many years is it since you went away, Judith?" I asked, as I saw her busying herself in dairy and kitchen, the places that were so familiar to her.

"Seven years, come next spring," said Judith,

"but now I'm back again, and see the oven and dresser standing just as how I left them, and them milk pails all of a row, and thee in the old chair, it seems as 'twas but yesterday as I left to go to Farmer Falls; and the strangest part of all is to think as how I should cry to see *her* go from here."

So Judith reigned in the old place; and things went on smoothly, for whatever she may have been to a mistress, she made a perfect housekeeper for a bachelor. Fortune and all she had brought with her was gone, passed away as completely as though she had never been at Fairlie. That page in my life was folded down, and a new one—bereft of much of the old joy, the sunshine that Harold had given to all around him, but with much of blessing yet remaining and rich with opportunities of usefulness, was opening for me.





CHAPTER XVIII.

"O, but life is strong, and us
Bears with its currents onwards; us who fain
Would linger where our treasures have gone down,
Though but to mark the ripple on the wave,
The small disturbing eddies that betray
The place of shipwreck. Life is strong, and still
Bears onward to new tasks and sorrows new,
Whether we will or no."



YEAR had passed since the fatal accident at High Coombe that had robbed my life of so much of its brightness. Spring, summer, returning with their fresh beauty, woke in my heart the old sorrow, the yearning for him who lay there in the churchyard on the hillside, never to know change of season, spring-tide, or falling leaf again.

The very sight of the children who played together in the woods, and scrambled after primroses along the banks of the trout stream where Harold and I had played and laughed in our childhood, had a bitterness for me; I felt that I was poorer than the poorest, more destitute than the most wretched, for I had no brother.

I had grown listless and lost my old energy. It was an effort to go about my work, and though I did it, it was a tasteless duty, and no longer a keen interest and pleasure.

For long I shrank from going to High Coombe, much as I wished to see Miss Sabin, out of sheer dread of revisiting those scenes which were so full of painful remembrances for me. When I did go, I found Miss Sabin entirely taken up with her uncle, who was seriously ill, and although she was kind enough to see me, and asked feelingly after Fortune and myself, it was only for a few minutes. Meanwhile I was glad to see Fortune recovering her spirits and looks. The affectionate care of her parents had not proved in vain, and the elasticity of youth showed itself in much of her old brightness. I was quite glad to hear her voice singing again in the mill garden, and to find it easy to tempt her out for walks and drives.

One day, indeed, I had rather a fright, for as I was coming up the mill close I met Dr. Fisher—a clever young doctor who had lately come to Rockhead, and whom I knew attended the Mavors—coming out of the house.

“I hope there is nothing wrong?” remembering that I had met the miller and his wife on the road just now, I said anxiously, “Have you been to see my sister-in-law?”

His answer relieved my fears. "O no, there was nothing wrong, only Mr. Mavor had a cold the other day, and was nervous about himself, and so I thought I would look in on the way to Wenlock." He added politely how glad he was to see Mrs. Isham picking up again; I thanked him, and went home satisfied, but when I mentioned the incident to Judith and smiled at my needless fears, she shook her head with an air of displeasure, and remarked that she had no love for that spruce young doctor, a-finicking with that eye-glass of his and smooth-brushed hair, like any lady.

I reproved her for her intolerance, and told her that I heard he was a very intelligent man, and was coming in to a very good business.

"I knows nothing about his 'telligence," was all Judith would condescend to say in his favour, "but I've heard as he's taken the big house in Rockhead, and drives his own carriage," by which she meant the gig in which Dr. Fisher went his rounds. So the matter dropped.

A week or two afterwards Sir Edmond sent me on a visit to a friend of his in Cornwall, on pretence that he wished me to give that gentleman the benefit of my advice in some farm buildings that he was doing, but really, I believe, wishing, in the kindness of his heart, to give me a change,

and as he pressed me to extend my holiday, I went on to visit the coast, and did not return for six weeks.

I came back refreshed and invigorated, to find home all the more comfortable, and Judith's attentions the more agreeable for a month's experience of travelling and country inns, and the next day after I had been to the Hall and seen Sir Edmond, I walked to the mill to take Fortune a brooch I had brought her from the Lizard. To my surprise I found a horse tied up to the garden gate, and as I went in met Dr. Fisher a second time issuing from the door. He hurried past me with a bow, which I just returned and went in to find Fortune, still in her black, but looking like her old self, with her fair hair coiled in tresses about her head, and the widow's cap laid aside, sitting in the parlour alone.

She greeted me warmly, and talked for some minutes of myself and my travels, and of her father, who had been ailing. Then she looked up at me and said, a little nervously—

“Laurence, I wanted to see you. There is something I wish to tell you, because I should not like you to hear of it from any one else. Dr. Fisher has asked me to be his wife, and my parents have given their consent. Of course”—she went on hurriedly, as if fearful of what I should say—“of course I

should not think of being married till next summer, when the two years are over, but I thought I would tell you for fear of your learning my intentions from others."

She paused, and I stood looking at her too much amazed and bewildered to find words.

"You mean to say that you are going to marry that man whom I just met coming out of here?" I said, with cold severity.

"O don't, Laurie, don't be angry with me," said Fortune, bursting into tears, "it isn't that I have forgotten dear Harold. I never could do that, and I told Dr. Fisher so just now, but father says I am too young to remain a widow all my life, and you know he's getting old, and would like to see me with a home of my own, though I know I can never be so happy as I was at Fairlie."

The sight of Fortune's tears, and those pleading, childish tones which Harold never could resist, came to the help of my better nature. They brought back the memory of the last words I had ever heard Harold say as he lay dying in the little room at High Coombe, "Laurie, boy, be good to Fortune!"

I thought of them, and mastered myself with a great effort.

"No, Fortune," I said, "do not mistake me. Do not think that I would ever stand in the way of

anything that might be for your happiness. But this Dr. Fisher, are you quite sure about him? Do you know anything of him?"

"He is a good man," she said humbly, "and I am sure he would not do anything to hurt you. He says he is ready to wait for years, if I wish it, as long as I can give him hopes of one day being his wife. And you know," she added, with a little of the eye to her own advantage, which used to make Judith say that Fortune was too clever as a child, "you know he is well off, and can offer me a very nice home."

"Aye, woman all over," I thought to myself; but I kept this reflection to myself, and offered no further remark. Fortune's mind was evidently made up, and if she did not feel that she was doing a wrong to Harold, in so soon allowing another to occupy the place he had held in her heart, there was no use in my opening her eyes to it; only I inwardly resolved I would make inquiries about Dr. Fisher, and so discharge the last duties I owed to her who had been my brother's wife.

As I left her, I met Mrs. Mavor in the garden. She came up to me at once, and, guessing what had happened began—

"Ah, Laurie, you mustn't be hard upon Fortune. He's not a bad man, and wonderfully fond of her,

although he'll never be what Harold was to me and us all. But we can't help it if we're not all made with the same hearts, and perhaps it is as well for those who can forget."

I could only press her kind hand, and turn away with a choking sensation in my throat and a dull pain at my heart.

Was there no truth, no faithfulness, then, in woman! No divine, everlasting power in love, love that I had dreamed of as strong as death!

Judith's expressions of her feelings on hearing of Fortune's intended second marriage were delivered in no measured language. To think of such a thing, it made her hair stand on end! A thinking of marrying when her husband had been scarcely a year in his grave, and when he'd been such a one as Maister Harold, than whom there wasn't a finer lad in the whole country. It was a sin, a downright crime. She couldn't have believed it of Mrs. Isham; and as for that dandy of a doctor, she'd like to box his ears, and send him back to school to learn his manners. He might know better indeed than to be coming after other people's wives, instead of minding his drugs and patients.

I was too deeply hurt to be angry. But as I exhorted Judith to charity and forgiveness, I felt all the while that a cruel wrong had been done me,

and that it was very hard to think kindly of Fortune. That she should choose that man after Harold—my Harold, who was so true and gentle and noble. Harold, who, as Judith said, had not his equal. I took a long solitary walk by the sea-shore that evening, listening to the beat of that tide which, better than any other influence, seemed to soothe and lull my troubled thoughts to rest, before I could bring myself to think and speak calmly of the impending event. As I lingered on the edge of Durstone Rocks, I remembered the day long ago when I had been caught by the tide there, and had almost paid for my imprudence with my life.

Then as now, it was Fortune who had disappointed and wounded me. Only then it was for a better and a worthier one that she had changed, then it was I whom she had slighted ; this time it was Harold, and if the blow was a less severe one, the wrong was far harder to forgive.

In the light of this present act of hers I understood the past more clearly, and I saw now how wisely all had been ordered, and that it was well for me Fortune had never cared for me enough to become my wife. After that, however, I never vexed Fortune with reproaches, and since there was nothing to be found against Dr. Fisher's character, and he seemed to be really attached to her, I went

so far as to meet him civilly, and brought myself to shake hands with him and show him that I bore no ill-will, although by mutual consent we never advanced to intimacy.

Another event happened a few days afterwards, which turned my thoughts in a different direction.

As I was leaving the timber-yard at Silscote one afternoon, I met a strange figure, wrapt in a red shawl, riding a pony, with panniers on either side, and recognised Lyddy, the gipsy woman I had seen at the Coombe Farm.

I accosted her, and heard from her, to my surprise, that her master, Farmer Sabin, had died last week and been buried yesterday at Lynch. It was strange that no tidings had reached me of this, but I remembered not only that I had been away myself, but that Sir Edmond had gone abroad for a short trip with his family, and that all letters to him would have been forwarded direct in my absence.

I asked Lyddy after Miss Sabin, but could extract nothing further from her, excepting that her mistress was still at the Coombe, and as far as she knew was not leaving just yet; and, telling her that I would ride over before long, I let her go on her way home.

This news had awakened the deepest compassion in my heart for Miss Sabin. I felt how alone and

desolate she must be all by herself in that wild place, without a friend to help or advise her; and I remembered, not without remorse for my own selfishness, what a dreary time this long illness of her uncle's must have been for her. Certainly the one or two formal visits I had paid her during this anxious time were but a poor return for all the sympathy and kindness she had shown me in those terrible days of Harold's death. And yet, though I had seen her so seldom, she had been much in my thoughts these last weeks.

As I stood on the great cliffs by the ruins of Tintagel, listening to a wild sea breaking hoarsely on the rocks below, as I looked across the blue loveliness of soft, delicious Penzance Bay, and saw St. Michael's Mount shining in clear sunlight as it rose out of those splendid waters, how often had Cecily Sabin's face come before me! How often I had seemed to meet those true dark eyes which had been fixed on mine with such sorrowing compassion through the long hours of that terrible night; how often had the memory of her words come back to me with their message of heavenly consolation!

Yes, I had not forgotten her; although, heaven knows, I had given her cause enough to think so by my neglect. And now, before she left High Coombe, and our lives divided to go each in a separate

direction, I would see her once more, and at least show her that I was not altogether ungrateful for the goodness and friendship she had bestowed upon me in my darkest times.





CHAPTER XIX.

O swallow, swallow, flying, flying south,
Fly to her and fall upon her gilded caves,
And tell her, tell her, what I tell to thee.
O tell her, brief is life but love is long,
And brief the sun of summer in the north,
And brief the moon of beauty in the south."

BY the next day's post I received a letter from Sir Edmond, enclosing Miss Sabin's notice of her uncle's death, by which the Coombe Farm would be left unoccupied at Lady Day, and desiring me to go there as soon as possible and make arrangements with Miss Sabin for taking the farm off her hands at once, if she wished it. "And mind you find out," Sir Edmond added, "what Miss Sabin's own prospects are, and where she intends to live, for I should be sorry to lose sight of her."

I was not slow in obeying my master's directions. That very afternoon I took poor Harold's grey, and rode across the moor to High Coombe.

It was November; the day was cloudy, there had

been wet weather the last week, and the marshy ground on the hill-side was so deep and sodden that my horse's feet sank in at every step. Very unlike the glorious autumn day when Harold had followed the stag-hunt over the moor on his last ride, it seemed to me, and the memory of all that had been, and all that could never be again, pressed heavily upon my mind. I saw the boats far away on the Severn sea, and the burden of the old song which has spoken to so many desolate hearts came back to me with its mournful strain :

" The stately ships go on
To their haven under the hill ;
But O for the touch of a vanish'd hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still."

That hand could not hold mine again now in its strong warm clasp, the pleasant voice which had been better than any melody to me as we walked side by side on the journey through life, and watched the flowers spring up under our feet, was hushed in the long silence of the grave, and in darkness and loneliness I was left to wend the steep upward way.

And then from my own sorrow I was going on to Miss Sabin's, wondering what would become of her, if she had found a home with friends that were ready to welcome her, or if, more desolate even than myself, she was left homeless and friendless without

a Judith or a Sir Edmond to cheer her dark hours. At least I would give her Sir Edmond's message, and she would value that, and would feel that there was one person in the world in whose eyes her future was of interest.

I reached the Coombe Farm, and giving my horse to Silas, as usual, entered the house. Miss Sabin met me in the parlour, in her deep mourning, not altered, saving that she looked pale and thin, and I thought as we talked there were dark shadows under her eyelashes which told of sleepless nights and days of anxious watching. But she greeted me with the same quiet smile, the same perfect composure of manner, and asked kindly how I was, and if I had enjoyed my holiday before proceeding to business.

I thought Sir Edmond would have wondered at the clear-headed, business-like way in which she laid all the necessary papers before me, and entered into all details about the crops and stock on the farm, which she wished to give up at once to the incoming tenant, thus saving herself the trouble and difficulty of a sale. But from what I saw, Farmer Sabin had died in much the same circumstances as he had lived, and when his rent was paid and all creditors satisfied, I feared little, if anything, would be left. Yet Miss Sabin spoke as gently and kindly of her uncle as possible, talking

gratefully of his having passed away quietly at the last, and regretting in him one who, though he might have been rough at times, was a good friend to her.

When I had seen everything and felt that there was nothing more to be done, I could not help saying that I hoped she had something of her own to depend upon.

"You must not think me impertinent," I said in self-defence, "but Sir Edmond is particularly anxious to know your plans, and would be very sorry to lose sight of you."

Miss Sabin looked up with a light in her eyes, and the colour rose to her pale cheek as she replied—

"Sir Edmond is very good, but, to say the truth, I scarcely know yet. I think, though, I shall go at first to my old home near Taunton, and then look about for a situation."

"But I hope you have friends, relations who will care for you?" I could not help saying.

She looked at me half in surprise, half sorrowfully, and said quietly—

"I have no friends. My parents are dead, and this uncle was the only relation I had left. Other people are very kind, but one cannot live on charity. I must work for myself."

I could not understand her quiet courage. What

was there about this woman that made her so different to all others I had ever known ?

"You are brave, Miss Sabin," I said, "and I would be the last to shake your resolution. But it is a hard life you are going out to meet, a bitter and a lonely life, among strangers and faces that are new to you."

"I know it is," she said, not boastfully but steadily, as if she were facing the difficulties and measuring all that would be required of her. "I know it is, but you must not pity me too much, I am young and strong, and shall do very well." She tried to smile, but the result was but a poor shadow of her former brightness.

"You must try and take care of yourself," was all I could say. "I fear you are worn and tired. You must need rest."

Miss Sabin coloured again. Such interest in her from any one seemed new to her, and I would have said more, but that I feared to appear impertinent.

"Thank you," she said. "It has been a long illness this of my poor uncle's, and I am a little tired ; but I shall get rest now for a little bit."

There was no longer any excuse for lingering, and I rose to go. My heart was full, and I longed to tell her how deeply I felt for her—how much I hoped we might one day meet again ! But words

failed me, and I could only stumble over an awkward sentence of farewell and good wishes. • •

"Good-bye, Mr. Isham," she said, giving me her hand frankly; "good-bye, and thank you, once more, for all your goodness."

There was a tremulous sound in her voice, and as our hands met she dropped her eyes as if she could not trust herself to meet mine.

Then it was over. We had parted for the last time, and I was on my horse again, riding away over the moor and leaving High Coombe behind me.

I gave one more look back at the place which had graven itself so deeply for joy and sorrow in to my heart, and then put spurs to the grey and galloped home across the moor.

"Another page is turned down, another phase of my life ended," I said to myself, and tried with this wise reflection to quiet the hunger of my heart.

But it was no use. All that had happened since the day I first rode up to High Coombe more than two years ago came rushing back on my mind, and still more sadly all that might have been. What a world of wasted opportunities seemed to lie behind me, months and years when I might have made better use of Miss Sabin's presence, when at least she might have learnt to know and trust me so that I could have been of more help to her now!

Who knows what might have been then ! What if friendship, rooted in all that is highest and holiest in hope and aim, had deepened into love !

O what might not life spent with her have become, a life in which we might have walked together hand-in-hand, with faces turned towards the same goal, heart and soul meeting and blending in one heavenward aspiration !

How I would have shielded her from all danger, all suffering ! how tenderly I would have guarded and watched her, and made amends to her for all that she had found rough and hard in life till now ! How, ah ! how I would have loved her with all that strong ardent love that lay somewhere deep down in my nature, only waiting to be called into active being !

Once all that might have been, but now it was over. I had taken my last leave of Miss Sabin, and could only grieve over wasted opportunities and idle dreams of the future which might have been in store for me, had things been otherwise.

All the evening as I sat in the solitary parlour at Fairlie these thoughts kept troubling me, for Judith, finding that I was very bad company, after a few fruitless endeavours to obtain information respecting the bonny young leddy of the Coombe, whom she remembered with affection since the days when she lived at Lynch, had gone to bed and left me to my reflections.

One thing I was quite sure of: I should never find another woman like Miss Sabin, one so brave and good and gentle, a woman, above all, I felt instinctively, that would never have failed any one she loved, but would have been faithful till death, and beyond, a woman who, loving once, would have loved for ever.

It only made me the more indignant with myself to think what I had thrown away.

And yet, after all, was it too late? Could I not still, at the eleventh hour, as it were, go to her, and lay all my heart before her and say, I am utterly unworthy of you, but at least before you go let me tell you once that you are holier and dearer to me than all the world beside, even though you spurn me away from your feet afterwards? Surely I might do that still.





CHAPTER XX.

"O pure and perfect pearl,
O love which life hath dived so deep to find,
Locked in life's heart thou liest. The wave may curl,
The wind may wail above thee. Wave and wind
Nor break nor shake thee."



THE next day I rode back again to High Coonibe.

I found Miss Sabin already busy with preparations for departure. I thought there was a shade of surprise on her face as she met me in the parlour, but she made no remark, and took the receipt for the last quarter's rent which I had brought with me from my hands with a simple "Thank you."

Still I waited. Miss Sabin looked at me inquiringly.

Then at last I spoke.

"Miss Sabin," I said, "it was not only to bring that receipt I came. It was because I had a question to ask which only you can answer. I fear it is ill-timed, but I could not let you leave without saying this that I have wished to say so much. I

came to know if it is possible that you should ever be my wife?"

For a moment there was a silence, and I waited.

Miss Sabin's head was bent, the suddenness of my suit had taken her by surprise, and her calm had forsaken her.

Her voice faltered as she tried to speak, and the eyes she lifted to mine were all shining with tears.

But her hand was in mine, and there was no need of words between us. In that hour I knew that she was mine, and that, come what may, nothing could ever part us again.

When I left High Coombe to ride home it was one of the wettest nights I ever remember being out in. How the rain fell in driving torrents! How fiercely the wind whistled across the moor, shaking the juniper trees backwards and forwards in wild confusion, and blowing so furiously in my face that even the good grey found it hard work to get on!

But of wind and storm, of driving rain and howling tempest I recked little; for certain eyes had shone down upon me with a lovelier light than any I had known on hill or sea, and a sweet voice had spoken words that made music in my ears all that long homeward ride over the bleak moorland.

Cecily had given herself to me, had told me that

she loved me, and that, until she knew me, she had never found the man whose wife she could become. She told me, dear heart, how long ago, when she heard Judith speak of me, and heard others too say kind things of me, she had longed to know me, and then all that sad time when Harold's death had brought us so strangely together, she had yearned unspeakably to comfort and help me, till, without scarcely knowing it, she had begun to love me, and found how hard it cost her to say farewell.

Ah, that is love, not the mere pleasing of the fancy, the gratifying of the eye or ear, but the tie stronger than death which springs up between two souls who find each other out, and before all other aims wish to lead a high and noble life for God.

And to think that all these years, when I had thought myself so lonely and uncared for, this treasure, this priceless treasure, had been saving up for me, all unknown and undreamt of, and that Harold's death, the very blow which had crushed me to the ground, should have been the means of bringing me this untold blessing. It was indeed marvellous!

When I reached home, wet and dripping, but happy and thankful beyond all words, I found Judith in a very crusty temper. More than one person had been to see me on business, and I had

not even told her I was going out for the afternoon, and, indeed, what business had I to be out at all on such a night?

I let her scold away for a few minutes, and when she had exhausted her first fury, and relieved me of my wet things, I said to her—

“Now, Judith, you will perhaps listen to me for a little while. I have something to tell you.”

Judith gave me a look as if to say she doubted whether a night like this any news I had brought could be worth the telling.

“This is it, Judith,” I continued, speaking slowly that I might be quite sure that she understood what I said. “You remember that once long ago I promised that I would tell you first of all if ever I were going to be married? Now I am going to keep my promise.”

Judith’s interest was aroused in good earnest now. She stood with eyes and mouth wide open, staring at me perfectly aghast.

“Well, Judith,” I said, “the prospect does not appear to please you. Perhaps you have some wife in view for me, that you look so savage?”

Judith gave a grunt in return.

“There isn’t but one woman I’ve ever seen as is a fit match for thee, and I’ll be warranted it’s not her.”

“Oh, you have settled that, Judith, have you?

So much the better. At least, you will not be disappointed when I tell you who it is ; for I have chosen to please myself and nobody else. I daresay you would like to know what she is like beforehand, and I will tell you. You may not think her very beautiful, very fair to look upon, although she is all that in my eyes ; but this I am quite sure, that she has the truest, bravest heart that was ever given to woman ; more than that, she is as good and holy, as gentle and loving, as she is noble, and that never in all my life have I seen a woman who was at all her equal."

Judith's eyes expanded yet further. She looked at me as if she thought I had been suddenly deprived of my senses.

"But who is it ? None as I knows, I'll be bound," she said, only partially mollified as yet. I laughed.

"Never mind that ; but before I tell you, will you promise to love my wife for my sake, love her and serve her as truly and loyally as you have served me?"

And Judith promised, half doubtingly and reluctantly, but still she promised. Then I said Miss Sabin's name, and without another word Judith flung herself on my neck, crying—

"O my laddie, my laddie, thee has got the right one this time, thee has ! For there isn't another like her in all the wide world ; and from the first day that I knew her I said to myself, that's the

wife for my Laurie ; but I held my tongue, and when I found as thee know'd her, I thought it could na be, and thee was too much set against woman to think on her or any other."

So at last I had managed to please both Judith and myself, which was, to say the least, a fortunate thing for us both. And in justice to her, it is only fair to say that she kept her word faithfully, and proved a loving and dutiful servant to the new mistress who came to live at Fairlie.

It was with strange feelings that, tired with all the emotions of the day, I climbed the old stairs—those stairs which only last night I had been going up full of disquietude and perplexity, with a melancholy sense of wasted opportunities, and heart-heavy with the burden of parting. It seemed all so new, so wonderful, I could not understand it, could not believe that the woman I held true and holy beyond all others had indeed promised to be my wife, and told me that I was dearer to her than any. But it was good to wake the next morning and find that it was not all a dream.

I had slept later than usual, and when I looked out of the window people were already astir. Down below in the dairy I could hear the clinking of Judith's pails as she set them down ; cocks and hens were cackling, and the cows standing waiting to be milked. Everything was going on the

same as usual, every one going about his usual work. Only to me the change had come, a change like that when the bare branches burst out into blossom and the birds break into song, because the spring has come. I looked at the green turf of the hill-side dipping down into the Severn sea, at the sun shining through the mists which wrapt the woods in a transparent whiteness as of a bridal veil, and thought that Cecily was mine, for this life and beyond.

But it was only for a moment. There was work to be done, and plenty of it. When we parted yesterday she had said to me that, although we should not see each other during the next few days, the thought of each other would help us to do our daily duties all the better, and I would at least strive not to be unworthy of her idea of me.

It did seem though as if I never should get through my work that morning. There were all Sir Edmond's letters to open or forward in his absence, besides my own usual business. It was Saturday, and so there were the Hall gardeners to pay, and the keepers to see, and at dinner-time, just when I was thinking that I could step down to the mill and tell Fortune and Mrs. Mavor the good news I was longing to share with others, up comes Tom Carvil, with a long face, to inform me that there

was something wrong with the steam saw, and it would not work.

"And there's all them posts and rails to be made, and planks for the flooring of the school-house, as his worship was uncommon parteeklar should be ready afore he was back from furrin' parts; and the trees a waiting to be sawed, and no power as can move the wheels."

Poor Tom! what was to be done? Of course I could not leave him to battle with these new difficulties unassisted, and the next two hours were spent in coaxing and oiling the refractory engine, till at last the saw was put in motion, and the work able to proceed as usual. When I left the timber-yard it was four o'clock, and feeling pretty sure I should find the Mavors at home, I bent my steps through the Hall grounds to the Old Mill.

I walked up the path, now red with leaves that fell thickly from the beeches, and knocked at the door, but as no answer came, I entered. They were all in the kitchen, the old miller in his chair by the fire-side, looking on, while his wife and Fortune moved busily to and fro, making preserves.

"Why, Laurie!" said Mrs. Mavor, looking up from a huge bowl of liquid whortleberry jam which she was stirring up with a wooden ladle, "why, Laurie, this is an odd time for you to call. Come in, though, bless you, my boy, I'm always glad to

see you ; and there 's father there, who likes to hear the news, and isn't up to his elbows in preserves !” And she laughed good-humouredly as she nodded over her tucked-up sleeves and bared arms.

“How do you do, Laurie ?” said Fortune, a little shyly, coming forward from the dresser, where she was tying up gallipots and labelling them with name and date, for Mrs. Mavor was a model of economy and order. She had not seen me since the day she had announced her intention of marrying Dr. Fisher, and might naturally think I had something further to say on the subject. “Look here,” she went on, without giving me time to answer, “here is a pot for Fairlie, and we have not forgotten Laurie, have we, mother ?” And she held up a gallipot with my name on it, and presented it gaily to my view.

“Ah, Mrs. Mavor,” I said, “you never forget me, whatever it is you have in hand ; and now I have come here to-day to show you how much I depend upon your sympathy and kindness of heart, by telling you some news that concerns me very nearly.”

“All three, the miller, his wife and daughter, looked at me with sudden curiosity, and Fortune gave a scream of surprise as I continued—

“The truth is, I am going to be married.”

“You, Laurie, you ; well, I never !” was Mrs. Mavor's breathless exclamation. “Why, if I

didn't think there wasn't a woman you knew to speak to unless it were old Judith, and it's scarcely likely to be her."

We all laughed, and the miller said—

"Come, lad, out with it, let's hear who is the lucky girl, for she is a lucky one to have caught a husband who shook his head at all the lasses of the valley."

"Perhaps it is a valley girl after all, father," said Fortune, laughing.

"Kate Malsbury?" said Mrs. Mavor, dubiously, but Fortune was quite sure it could not be her; and Mrs. Mavor explained that she had only "clapped her thoughts on" to the only girl of my old friends who was still unmarried.

Then I thought it was time to put them out of suspense, and said, "It is Miss Sabin, who lives at the Coombe Farm on the moor, and whose uncle died the other day."

"Cecily Sabin!" cried Fortune, "O Laurie, how glad I am. I am sure you could not have a better wife."

I grasped her proffered hand warmly, and briefly explained how it had all come about. It took me a long time before I could answer all their questions; they would hear everything, and there was no end to Mrs. Mavor's exclamations of "Well, I never!" and "Who'd have thought it of you, Laurie?"

But both she and the miller agreed in pronouncing the news I had brought them as most satisfactory, and although they knew little of Miss Sabin, were hearty in their assurances of welcome and affection for my wife.

"For you see, Laurie, you have always been a kind of son to me, being Fortune's brother," good Mrs. Mavor concluded, "and so whoever you wed must be my daughter too. And now we shan't have to fret any more over your leading such a lonesome life, for though I didn't like to speak much of it, seeing it was not to be mended, it worried me to think you should live all by yourself up there."

Fortune was quieter in her congratulations. Perhaps the memory of those summer days long ago, when Harold first wooed her for his bride, came back to her again; anyhow, I felt the mention of Miss Sabin could not help recalling sad passages in her life, and I was touched at the genuine feeling in the tone of her voice as she followed me to the door, saying, "I am glad it is *her*, Laurence; I have never forgotten how good she was to me that dreadful day we were at High Coombe."

I pressed her hand in return.

"She will be a sister to you now, Fortune, if you will let her."

"Thank you, Laurie," said Fortune, and as she

looked after me with a smile, I was glad to feel that all remains of any bitterness there might have been between us had passed away.

After all, perhaps, as Mrs. Mavor said, it was not her fault if her nature was slight and variable, if she was not as deep and true as I knew now some women could be. Besides I was too happy myself to be otherwise than charitably disposed towards Fortune and every one else.

It was a more difficult task to tell Sir Edmond. I thought at first I would write to inform him of my intended marriage, especially as he had desired me to let him know what happened to Miss Sabin, and with that intention I sat down to compose a letter.

But although I applied myself to the task with all my powers, and tried at least a dozen different turns of sentence before I could arrive at one at all proper to the occasion, I found it impossible to satisfy myself in this respect, and after writing and then tearing up three successive sheets, I resolved to spoil no more writing paper, and to leave the announcement till Sir Edmond's return.

In about ten days' time he came back from abroad, and the very first time I saw him at the Hall, he said to me—

“Look here, Isham, you never told me what had become of Miss Sabin. Has she left High Coombe?”

I replied, not without some awkwardness, that I believed she had.

Sir Edmond had evidently heard nothing, for he only lifted his forefinger to his forehead in a reflective manner, and said—

“I have been thinking what we could do for her. What should you say, Isham?” he continued, doubtfully. “I don’t suppose it would ever have done to keep her on as tenant in that lonely place; but I heard something about her wanting to keep a school, and I thought perhaps we might help her to a house. There’s that one which has been empty this half-year at Crockford. What should you say? We might let her have it at a low rent.”

He looked inquiringly at me, and I felt very red and awkward, and wished myself anywhere else for the moment.

“You don’t like the idea,” Sir Edmond went on, taking my silence for a reluctant consent. “I know it’s a good house, but we don’t seem to find a tenant, and it’s better to have it occupied, if it is only to keep the boys from breaking the windows.”
“There was no help for it. I was obliged to explain now.

“I beg your pardon, Sir Edmond,” I stammered out, “I ought to have answered your question about Miss Sabin before. She has given up any idea she may have had of earning her living, for she

is going to be married. The fact is—I hope you will have no objection, Sir Edmond,—but she has promised to be my wife.”

Sir Edmond turned sharply round from the window, where he was standing with his back to me, with a pleased exclamation—

“Ha! is that it? Well, this is news indeed. I never expected to hear this,” he said, with an amused smile playing over his features, “but I am glad, exceedingly glad of it, Isham. Nothing could have given me greater pleasure.”

There was no doubting Sir Edmond's sincerity, for the warmth of his manner, the cordial way in which he shook me by the hand and wished me happiness, said more than any words.

I tried to thank him, but he spared my confusion, by good-naturedly saying—

“Well, that is all right. I need not trouble my head about Miss Sabin any further, seeing you have anticipated anything that I can do. And as long as I keep her in the valley and know she is well cared for, I am not particular as to the rest. Now for other business.”

So those whose friendship and approval I valued most joined in sharing my joy, and rejoicing in my new-found happiness, and when at last Cecily came to live in our valley, never to leave my side any more, she found a warm welcome awaiting her.



CHAPTER XXI.

"O sweeter than the marriage feast,
'Tis sweeter far to me,
To walk together to the kirk
With a goodly company.
To walk together to the kirk,
And all together pray,
While each to his Great Father bends,
Old men, and babes, and loving friends,
And youths and maidens gay."



We were married. In the spring-time, when the violets were blue in the lane, and the birds sang their gladdest, we met in the little church on the hill.

The skies were bright and cloudless that morning, and the woods arrayed themselves in their fairest adorning of tender green to welcome my bride. All along the valley, too, people trooped out in their Sunday clothes; from the moor farms and Clystall Hill down to Wenlock town on the sea-shore, young and old came to see us married.

Not only the church, but the churchyard was full, and as I walked up the gravel path within the

lych-gate, with Fred Malsbury accompanying me as best man, kind faces and greetings from well-known voices met me on every side.

Sir Edmond was there in church, and Lady Wyncourt and her children. Little Miss Helen had herself worked a kettle-holder of rainbow colours, as a wedding present for me, and old Silas was there from High Coombe. He must be there, he had said, to see his bonny young leddy wed, and so he had pushed his way through the crowd, and stood there close to the chancel in a flaming orange-coloured tie, which he had purchased for the occasion, watching for the bride's entrance.

And Judith was there too. Mrs. Mavor and Fortune had insisted on Cecily being married from their house, and the wedding-dinner taking place at the mill, so Judith was able to be there, relieved from all responsibility; and the first thing I saw as I entered was her upright figure in the new shawl and gown I had given her, but which few would be the wiser for, since she had insisted on their being precisely the same cut and colour as her last.

Mrs. Mavor herself, kind soul, had stopped at home busy with preparations for the dinner that was to be ready on our return, and Fortune had preferred to stop and help her, shrinking perhaps from witnessing a marriage which would have reminded her so forcibly of her own.

It seemed like a dream to be standing there at the altar steps, with the white-haired vicar, who had known me from a boy, joining our hands together, and Cecily standing opposite in her light silk and with the lily wreath in her bonnet. But she was quiet and still as ever, unconscious, it seemed to me, of all the eyes bent upon her, only intent on the solemn service that was to make us one. Her voice did not falter as she pronounced the words of the marriage vow, "till death us do part," and the true dark eyes that were lifted to mine for one moment met me as calmly as when we had stood together by Harold's bedside.

It was not till the service was ended, and we were walking together down the church, and out into the crowded churchyard, my wife and I, that I first began to realise all my blessedness. In the air above us the joy-bells were ringing their circling peals, and children were throwing flowers at our feet, primroses from the banks of the trout stream, blue violets and showers of golden crocus.

For one moment we stopped beside Harold's grave; that, too, was bright with flowers to-day, and I could not help saying—

"If only he were here, then our joy would be perfect."

She turned her eyes to me with their consoling

light—my love, my wife, now all my own for ever, and said softly—

“He is knowing it all, dearest. And we too, we shall not forget how much of all this is owing to him.”

And from my face her gaze was turning upwards to those blue heavens, which bent so warmly and lovingly over us.

Then we passed on to receive the greetings of our friends, and as I shook hands with the grey-headed men who had worked on the estate before I was born, I heard more than one call down a blessing on the bride who leant on my arm.

At the door of the mill Fortune was waiting to receive us, and before she would let us enter Mrs. Mavor folded Cecily into her motherly embrace.

The rest of the wedding party, Cecily's Taunton friends, Fred Malsbury and his sisters, and a few others had followed us in, and we sat down some eighteen or twenty to dinner, in the large parlour of the mill.

Mrs. Mavor had been determined to do us honour, and nothing was wanting that could belong to a wedding feast. We were placed at the head of the table, with a cake of prodigious size opposite us, and all the guests as they entered wished us joy afresh, and there was much joking and merry-making, and full justice was done to the

good cheer before us ; and then our healths were drunk, and the miller insisted that Cecily must herself cut the cake, and declared he had never seen so self-possessed a bride, and one that made so little fuss about it. I know that we were both very glad when at last it was all done, and we were able to leave without discourtesy to our kind friends, and walk up home together.

Now that years have passed since then, that quiet little walk along the valley, when first I led my bride home, is present to my thoughts as vividly as if it had taken place but yesterday.

It was all so fresh and still, the afternoon sunshine resting upon the fields, and birds and rustling leaves and running waters making music all round us. And we were both as happy as children to have escaped from the talking and laughing, and just have each other to ourselves. Hand in hand, as henceforth we were to walk through life together, we went up the lane, and into the house, where we found Judith, who having gone home an hour or two before, had made all ready for our coming.

Tea was laid in the parlour. The old brown tea-pot, which had survived so many changes, stood on the snowy table-cloth, and butter and Exmoor honey in their green vine-leaf dishes, and a loaf of golden kissing-crust that would have delighted Miss Helen's heart.

Very sweet and home-like it all seemed, with the scent of lilacs and laburnums coming in through the open door, as we sat down to rest by the open window, looking over the sea.

How Cecily admired it all! Excepting that one winter's day, when she had come to see Fortune, and I had been down at Silscote, she had never been at Fairlie, and now it was a new delight to show it her all, and it was no wonder our valley seemed fair to her, after living so long on the bleak moor.

Presently I took her upstairs, too, into the old best bedchamber, now to be hers, and she took off her bonnet and came down to partake of Judith's tea.

We found her in difficulties. The unusual excitement of the day had thrown her off her balance, and she was all of a flutter, as she expressed it, because the kettle would not boil on this of all days in the year, and there was still the bread and butter to cut, just when she had meant it all to be ready and waiting for our arrival.

Cecily laughed, and seizing on the loaf, began to cut bread and butter herself, in spite of all Judith's remonstrances, and further insisted, as soon as the lazy kettle had commenced boiling, that Judith should sit down and have tea with us.

Of course Judith objected violently, but Cecily would have her way, and paying no heed to

exclamations or protest, herself brought a third cup and plate, and placed the chair for Judith, who at length consented.

"There was no denying her, and besides, 'twould be bad luck to say no to a bride upon her wedding-day."

And all the while I sat in the arm-chair by the window, watching my wife cutting bread and butter in her wedding-gown, and thinking that I was the happiest of men.

Later in the evening Cecily and I wandered out for a stroll along my favourite cliffs by the seashore.

There, as we lingered, watching the clear-shining grey of the sunlit rocks, and the thousand hues of opal tint that mingled in the waters which rolled up at our feet, I showed my wife Durstone Caves, and told her the story of my early liking for Fortune, and my despair on the day when I almost lost my life there. She listened with gentle sympathy and interest.

"It was God's will, dearest," she said, "was it not? He was leading you all the while to see that there was something better than wishes satisfied and hopes fulfilled. Only while one is in the midst of the struggle, one cannot see the end, and it all seems dark and full of despair. But we have only to trust on and wait long enough.

The morning comes to all. If not here, it will be *there.*"

And she pointed to where in the western heavens the golden clouds seemed to open like the portals of another world.

"Yes, I know it now. The morning comes to all," I repeated, drawing my wife's arm into mine as I spoke. "I see it all clearly now, how our Father cares even for our earthly happiness, and why it was He Whose way is in the sea, and Whose footsteps are not known, denied me what would have been no lasting good or real blessing, to give me something far, far better."

My wife smiled back at me out of her deep beautiful eyes.

"Ah, Laurence," she said, "I have often thought how true it is that His way is in the sea and His path in the deep waters; but then all the while, although we do not know where He is taking us, we have to comfort us that next verse, which tells us how He led His people like sheep."

And I knew that Cecily was right, as she always is. Truly He had been a Good Shepherd to us, and was now making us to rest in green pastures and by the still waters.

Together we stood on the rocks, watching the setting sun as it dropped into the sea, crowning the cliffs with the radiance of heaven, and lighting

up the white sails of a boat that was entering the harbour of Wenlock Bay.

My boat had gone into port, had after all its wanderings found its desired haven, and come safe to land. Life had that day won a new glory, not of earth, and the future seemed to open out before me, like those sunset clouds, breaking up on either side, and leading up in a straight path to the Throne of God.

"O Laurence," my wife said, with a long deep-drawn sigh, as we turned back into our own garden, and she let her head rest for a moment on my shoulder, "O Laurence, I did not know it was possible to be so happy!"

I thanked God as I heard her. Henceforth it should be the dearest wish of my heart, the aim of my constant, unceasing effort, to make her happy, keep her from all harm and suffering, tenderly to watch over her, and make up to her a thousand-fold for all the dark and lonely days that she had known.

So we would live together, not for selfish pleasure or idle enjoyment, but to spend a life of active, useful work for the glory of God and the good of our fellow-creatures, a life only begun here, to expand and be carried on *there*, where the aspirations of earth find fulfilment, and the scattered, half-formed aims of this world

are gathered up and rounded into the perfect whole.

Of the festivities of that wedding-day, of the unclouded brightness of my happiness now that Cecily was mine, I can speak, but what my wife has been to me since then, that I can never say. Many years have come and gone, years of chequered light and shade, as all life must be, of many and great blessings, tempered by some sorrows, years in which I have learnt more fully than I ever dreamt how unspeakably blessed a thing is the perfect union of hearts that have met in God ; learnt, too, how full of precious teaching the daily, hourly duties of the most commonplace life can become—

“ The life which over-long may prove
For passion or for power,
But too, too short for that still love
Which blesses every hour.”

Our children are growing up around us now. Harold, our eldest born, is a tall, fine-grown boy, with his mother's eyes, but the high brow and chestnut locks which belonged to one long dead.

His ways remind me strangely of his uncle, and often when his gay laugh rings in my ear, I start and think it is my long-lost brother, forgetting

how many years have passed away since we laid the turf on my Harold's grave, under the flowering mountain-ash in the churchyard on the hill. He has the same frank, careless manner, the same fearless spirit, the same love of horses which had long ago won Uncle Christopher's heart, and to him no delight is so great as that of following the stag-hunt, when it comes sweeping down Clytsall Hill and over the open moors on some bright September morning.

But though his high spirits and reckless daring sometimes make me fearful for my boy's future, I feel that I need not have much anxiety so long as he bears the ardent affection and devotion to his mother that he does now.

Her will is law to him ; to her wishes he pays instant attention, and a word from her can control him in his wildest moods. He is gentle and protecting to his sisters too, Mary and Cecily, my youngest darling, the pet and plaything of the household. They in their turn look up to Harold with the utmost admiration and respect.

For these three children Cecily lives. Their welfare, their education and training are the objects of her constant solicitude ; yet although there never lived a more devoted wife and mother, strange to relate, she has time and thought to spare for all who make demands on her sympathy

and help. Only of herself she never seems to think ; and so we, my children and I, have to do that for her.

For myself there is no better pleasure than to stop watching her, as she sits at work in the parlour, or on the garden-seat where the fuchsias have grown tall, with the sunlight falling upon her quiet brow, as white and smooth as ever, looking scarcely a day older than on that evening, when in the lonely farm on the far-away moor, I first told her all my love.

High Coombe—the mention of the place reminds me that we were there not long ago. The anniversary of our wedding-day had come round again, and when we discussed how the day should be spent this year, my wife said that she should like to see the old place again. It is so rarely that she expresses a wish of any kind for herself, that I caught gladly at the suggestion, and accordingly when the day came, we all drove together over the moor to visit the spot.

Things are much changed there. The present occupier keeps the place in excellent order, and it is now very unlike the tumble-down old house it was in Farmer Sabin's days. But we found our friend Silas still there, and made him promise to come and see us at Fairlie, and showed him the little girls, neither of whom, however, he declared

would ever be the "swate cratur" their mother had been, a point which I had no inclination to dispute.

While the children ran wild in the woods, and over the hill-side, Cecily and I sat down on the old well, a little way from the farm-buildings, opposite the window of that very room where Harold died. The branches of feathering birch and ash still hung their delicate tresses over the roof, and the birds were singing in their shade as they sang that day when he lay dying. Sitting there we recalled the scenes of past years, the strange chain of events by which we had first been drawn together.

"That was just the darkest time of my life, Laurence," my wife was saying. "My mother's death had left me alone in the world, and the first months I was here the place used to seem so unutterably dreary, without any one to speak to but my poor uncle. And then you came, and were the first person who seemed kind, and tried to help me, and gave me the advice I wanted."

"How well I remember it all, the dog barking, and Silas talking to me, and then your coming out," I said, going back in thought to my first ride across the moor. "I hated the neglected look of the place, and was prepared to be severe. And then I came, and it was all so different to what I

had expected, and I could only wonder at your being so brave, and went back full of concern at your living in such a desolate place."

"Certainly I never thought then," said Cecily, with a bright smile, "what was coming. I never dreamt of happiness for myself in those days. I had had so little of it, all my youth had seemed one trouble after another. I used only to pray for strength to live bravely, and do my duty by my uncle. And just the same when he died. I never looked forward to anything but a lonely life."

"Until I came in my rashness and took you by surprise," I said. "And are you quite sure, Cecily, are you quite sure that you have never repented the decision you then made? I mean that you, with all your wisdom and your goodness, might not have found a better fate?"

I spoke half playfully, half in earnest, so often did the thought strike me that this wife of mine was far above me, worthy of some infinitely greater mind to share her heart and life.

But when she turned to me with the happy smile on her face, and a look of beautiful trustfulness in those dear dark eyes, I felt that I needed no other answer.

The voices of the children returning from their games were coming nearer, and I could only take her hand in mine and say in my heart, "Thank God

for it all, and for the priceless treasure He has given me in her."

There are others of whom I must speak though, and first of all of Judith. Judith is still alive, although quite an old woman, too infirm to work any longer. But she lives in one of the cottages at Fairlie, just at the foot of the lane, and is well cared for. My children go and see her every day of their lives, and no wonder, for she spoils them terribly, and looks upon them all as her grand-children, and therefore upon herself as privileged to indulge them in all their fancies.

Harold especially she dotes upon, seeing in him the likeness of her lost boy, the Harold we both loved so well, and declaring that in him are combined the excellences of the three persons she held dearest on earth, my brother, my wife, and myself.

Fortune married again very soon after our wedding, and went to live at Rockhead, in Dr. Fisher's new house. She has a large family, and has known much trouble and anxiety lately, poor thing. Owing to a protracted illness her husband lost much of his practice; she herself has suffered a good deal in one way or another, and I fear they find it hard to make both ends meet at times.

Here was not a nature made to struggle with adversity. She has become fretful and desponding, and is sadly changed from the pretty, merry girl I remember her.

Cecily does all in her power to help and cheer her, and is for ever contriving plans by which she can assist her, sending her presents and having the children to come and stop at Fairlie.

My girls, too, catch their mother's spirit, and I constantly find one or the other preparing some little surprise for Aunt Fortune, or putting away their pocket-money to buy dolls and toys for the Rockhead cousins, as they like to call them.

Fortune herself often comes to see us. She has retained a warm affection for both of us, and sometimes, I think, looks half enviously at the comfort and brightness of our home, especially when she brings the weekly bills she has been crying over, for Cecily to count up and bring right.

Indeed I think she shows this preference almost too plainly at times, speaking with regretful yearning before her husband of the happy days when she lived at Fairlie, in a way which might wound him. It saddens me to hear her speak like this, and see how differently things have gone with her to what one would have expected; but perhaps after all there is a good purpose in it, and the trials of later life are teaching her lessons which

she failed to learn in the sunny days of early youth.

However this may be, we shall always look on her with affection, and I must ever take the deepest interest in all that concerns her, and that not only for Harold's sake, but for the dear old days when we played together, and grew up side by side, as it were, in our happy homes.

Both of Fortune's parents are dead. Mrs. Mavor, dear good soul that she was, died very suddenly in a fit, much like that which carried off her old mother Mrs. Grindley, only a week or two after Fortune married Dr. Fisher, and though the miller survived her it was but for a couple of years.

Then the mill was sold. Fortune told me one day, much to my grief, that it was to be so, and that I should see her old home pass into strange hands. Most fortunately for me, however, a friend came forward to buy it.

Not long after my marriage I was startled at receiving a letter from my old friend Jonas Claxton, the kind clerk in Runcorn's works at Blackfriars, saying that he was brought to Bristol on business, and if I had a spare bed, would step across the Channel to pay me a visit.

I was much pleased with this proposal. Of course he came, and we made him most welcome,

and kept him here for ten days or more ; indeed, he seemed so happy, I thought he never would tear himself away. It did one good to see the delight with which he, thorough Londoner that he was, revelled in the enjoyment of trees and birds and flowers, and his admiration of the valley and of Fairlie was fully such as to justify all Judith's ideas of those unfortunate people who live caged in bricks and mortar up in Lunnon, without a breath of fresh air or a sight of green fields to cheer their hearts, although indeed it was a mystery to her how Jonas' jolly red face could ever have come from there.

Then he confided to me his intention of some day retiring from business, and bringing his mother to end her days in this happy valley, and accordingly when two years later the mill was put up to auction, down came Jonas from town and bought house, and garden, and close.

Further yet, he not only came and settled there himself with his mother, but before very long married my old friend Kate Malsbury, and now has a family of his own.

And it is a comfort to me to feel that the old place, which was so favourite a haunt of my childhood, has not passed into the hands of a stranger, and to hear my own children's laughter mingled with that of their companions, echoing along the

banks where Harold and I used to play with Fortune Mavor.

My tale is almost ended now. It was to gratify my little Cecily that I first took up my pen and sat down to write the story of my life ; for nothing pleases her and her sister so much as to hear "stories out of father's life," whether it is of Uncle Harold and Judith that I tell them, or of my visit to London and all its sights, or my adventures on the moor or by the sea-shore. And so I have written this for her and her brother and sister to read in after-life, and have the history of my childhood and youth, and much that no one living but myself is left to tell, full and complete as I have told it here. I have said enough to show that in spite of its early sorrows no life has been more blest than mine, none has been more literally steeped in loving-kindness, and now when I look back on the past, and think of the days when I was a poor lame child, and thought that I would never be but a useless cripple, I can only wonder and thank God. But this, as the result of a life's experience, I would say to all : *in God's world there is room for each of us*. No one is so weak and small but that there is a work for him to do, a place in this vast universe which none else can fill, and if we will only look round for it, and train ourself by all the varied discipline God sends us in

the circumstances of daily life, we may be quite sure that in His own good time the work will come to us.

Whether we fail or succeed, it is not ours to determine. That must be as our Father wills, but if only we do the work that has been given us as well and perfectly as lies in our power, our reward is sure. The "*Well done*" of the end is waiting for us too, and when we close our eyes upon this world, it will be to open them again in a Father's arms.

Our Valley! With these words I began the story of my life, and with them I would end; for of all the blessings God has lavished upon me, I count it not the least that it is given me to end my days in the same home where I was born, among the dear and precious memories of my childhood.

And yet great and many are the changes which have come, even in my time, to our valley.

I have seen the steam-plough come turning up the turf on the hill-side, and the open moor enclosed, and something even of our fair valley's beauty sacrificed to the good of man.

I have seen what was a sadder sight to witness, the railway come close up to our valley, cutting through the prettiest bays, and bringing smoke and blackness to the sea-shore, and with it flocks of tourists coming to invade our quiet hills. But

all this has altered nothing of the almost feudal spirit in our valley, nothing of the loyalty and affection with which our people look up to Sir Edmond, and will do so as long as they have a master that has their welfare so truly at heart.

Many changes have come, and many more will come, doubtless, before another generation has passed from the valley. But I am not one of those who grieve over every change, and sigh for the return of the good old days; for in every change that passes over us, in every new advance of civilisation, every effort for the good of mankind, aye, in the strife of men, and the tumult of passions and contention of tongues crying out for rights that will profit them nothing, it is the Bridegroom's voice we hear. Slowly but surely His time is coming, and the everlasting morning is at hand—that morning for which we are looking and waiting, when all we have shall be made perfect, and all we have loved and lost shall be given back to us, when upon the mountains the day shall break and the shadows flee away.

THE END.

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